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First Impression

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CHAPTER I

"Bobs! Oh, Bobs! *Doctor* Bobs! Ancient of days!"

A husky growl from within the bungalow responded "Yep. Minute," to the impatient, young voice.

"A lovely matron waits eagerly on your doorstep." The visitor who thus modestly described herself, suggested, in her close-molded sweater, knickers, and impertinent little hat, a slender, strong, graceful boy rather than a grown woman. "Footman," she added, addressing an imaginary menial with gracious dignity, "announce Mrs. Cary Scott."

The door jerked open and a bulky bear of a man was almost tipped over backward by the impetus with which the lithe figure went to his arms. "You pig!" she cried. "How dare you come back after an endless year and not rush at once to The Knoll? What d'you mean by it? Cary sends you his undying curse."

"Why, Bambina," apologized the object of this denunciation, "I didn't get in till midnight, and——"

"I don't care if you didn't get in till sunrise. You should have hurled yourself at our door. Oh, Bobs, I *have* missed you." She gave him another hug, broke away, and projected herself in a flying-squirrel arc into the corner of a deep divan, where she sprawled with careless ease. Patricia Scott was one of those rare women who can sprawl without looking like a clothes

bag with superfluous legs. "What do you think of me?" she demanded.

"Untamed and unchanged," he answered after a squinting survey, accompanying the verdict with a sigh so disparaging that she protruded a resentful tongue at him. "Still clinging to your flaming youth at the advanced age of——"

"Liar, liar, liar, Bobs," she chanted. "I'm the most respectable young married woman of your limited but disreputable acquaintance. I never even look at any other man but Cary."

"Because you're afraid."

"Of Cary? Cary's a lamb. I can do anything with him."

"Hm. But you don't know what he mightn't do if you should begin to step out and that's why you're afraid. That isn't being respectable. It's being cautious."

"Bobs, you're a peril to the social structure. I think I'm doing awfully well; married nearly two years, and not so much as a single flutter outside. That's pretty near a record for Dorrisdale."

"For your set, perhaps."

"What other set is there I'd like to know?" she challenged insolently, "except the slows and the tabbies. I'll tell you, Lord Roberts, that this town is on the everlasting loose, and it takes all a feller's time looking after her husband. Do you know it's permanent open season for husbands in Dorrisdale, these days?"

"I don't think you'll have much difficulty in holding your own, Pat," he returned dryly.

"Which might be taken in any six or seven of two

ways," she retorted. "However, with the Dirty Dozen on the war-path, or the love-path, or whatever you want to call it——"

"The *which?*"

"Dirty Dozen. That's the ree-fined and elegant name by which the town calls 'em. The bunch that used to call itself the Irresponsibles. You know; the Dangerfields and the Standishes and the Bill Grants, and the Lloyd Parmenters and Careth and Tom Lindsay, and the Micky Adairs, and the Sam Beaumonts, and all that bunch of interchangeable hubbies and wifies."

"Careth Lindsay?" queried the doctor. "I shouldn't have supposed that——"

"Oh, just because she's got the face of an ivory angel and substitutes in the choir, you men all think she invented the Purity League. Though I wouldn't blame her, having Tom Lindsay for a husband."

"Wouldn't blame her for what? Inventing the Purity League?" he grinned.

"Well, for adopting its principles, anyway, as far as Tom's concerned. He's an awful washout. But at that, the men say she belongs to the Old Guard."

"Translate, please."

"Never gives up," giggled Pat. "Oh, Bobs, it *is* relieving to have somebody around again that I can say whatever I like to!"

"No respect for the innocence of age?" queried the doctor.

"Certainly *not*," returned Pat with her usual italicized effect. "Bobs, do you know that I adore you?"

"What are you after now?" he queried, cautious from long experience.

Pat's red mouth drooped. "Don't you believe that you can be loved for your worthy self? Oh, *well;* if you're going to put on that cynical expression! It's Rollo."

"*What*-o?" asked Osterhout, italicizing in his turn.

"Don't you remember the female Rollo-child that blighted the Fentriss household for a month four years ago? That little beast of a cousin of mine with the blinky eyes and the permanent grouch?"

"Carol Trent? Good Lord!"

"She's wished herself on Holiday Knoll. How are we going to cope with *that?*"

"Still, it might be worse," observed the other with the air of one who determinedly looks for the silver lining. "She's a sort of relative of mine, too, you know. It's much better as it is," he concluded piously.

"Dirty you!" retorted Pat. "But I can't quite see a maiden of twenty-two roosting in such a very bachelor establishment as yours. I *think*," she mused reflectively, "she's twenty-two, and I *know* she's the other thing. She'd have to be, with that face, poor little scrub."

"It isn't so long ago that the family were calling you just as uncomplimentary things as poor little scrub. Maybe she'll come through just as——"

"Just as I did," cut in Pat, neatly taking it away from him. "But that's different. I always had something on the ball."

"Can't you duck?"

"We-ell," drawled Pat, "you know how we Fentrisses are about any of our kin no matter how much of a minus sign they may be. She's pretty much alone in the world since her old swine of a grandfather died and

left her some money after never giving her a bean while he was alive. At that, I don't know that I'd stand for her except that"—she looked away from him—"Mona always had a sort of feeling for her, always insisted that all she needed was a chance and she'd develop into something."

At the mention of the name, Dr. Osterhout's face had changed. With Mona Fentriss, Pat's lovely and reckless mother, he had been deeply and hopelessly in love for years before her death. "Did she?" he said. "Well, Mona usually knew."

"We'll have a chance to check up soon enough. The dull but virtuous Rollo-child arrives on the ten-fifteen and you're going with me to meet her."

"Hence this devotion on your part! Might have known it. Unfortunately"—he directed a yearning glance toward his laboratory door—"I've got an experiment under way——"

"And you're going with me to meet her," repeated Pat calmly.

"Oh, hell!" spluttered Osterhout. "I know I am."

"You're always so good," purred Pat, "to animals and cripples and chee-ildren. Get me a cigarette and go shave your kind, intelligent face."

Over her cigarette Pat matured her plan. Bobs should be her advance guard, her outpost; from the preliminary skirmish between him and the invader she could outline her own campaign, which was founded upon the single desire to be rid of the encumbrance as soon as decently possible. Constance Browning, the eldest of the Fentriss sisters, should have been the one to inaugurate the family hospitality, but Connie was

always hard up, or away, or having a row with Fred, or a baby, or something (Pat reflected acidly) whenever anything was wanted of her. As for Mary Delia, the second sister, her hopelessly paralytic husband was in one of his bad spells, so that put the Jameson James house out of the reckoning. No, there was nothing for it but to take her in at Holiday Knoll.

"Cary *will* be bored," thought Cary's wife. "But he'll never let me see it, the darling. . . . Will he, Bobs?" she added aloud as the ursine doctor came shambling back into the room.

"I'm no mind reader. Will who what?" growled Osterhout.

"Oh, whip-poor-will, yourself," mocked Pat. "I'm talking about Cary."

"Probably he will, if you want him to. He always does as long as it's of no importance, and if it is, you always do as he wants, though he's too clever to let you realize it usually."

"Oh, I'm not such a fool as you think. But, Bobs, *ain't* it wond-ah-ful that after being married all this time to a man twice as old as I am, pretty near, I'm still so batty about him? I think I'm a ree-markable wumman!"

"Credit-grabbing again. Don't you give anything to Cary, or do you hog the whole score-board?" inquired Bobs, whose language had been totally corrupted by long association with the Fentrisses.

"We-ell,"—Pat's drawl, denoting conscientious consideration, elongated itself, "he never bores me."

"The whole secret of a successful marriage." Osterhout held open the door of her car and followed her in.

"I wouldn't say the whole," observed the young wife, thoughtfully. "Though it's pretty important. I never bore him either. Though I don't see why I don't. He knows so darn much more about everything than I do."

"I see why you don't," returned Bobs with his tolerant, understanding smile. "You're not the kind that men easily tire of, Bambina, even as regular breakfast food. You're too vivid, too vivified."

"Compliments from General Nut is praise from Sir Filbert, indeed, or words to that effect," said Pat, nearly running down a too trustful dog in her attempt to perform an appropriately gratified bow. "What's more, I don't let Cary be bored by other people. That's why I don't want Carol Trent rolloing around the Knoll."

"And is that, by any chance, why you're speeding rapidly in the opposite direction from the station?"

"I'm not. Just taking a little swing because we're early and I want to stop at the drug store," answered the mendacious Pat.

At the next corner she slowed down gradually, until, as they came opposite an expensively simple white house, looming high above the rampart of its clipped hedges, the car was moving quite deliberately. Osterhout's inner eye noted the house, although at the moment he was speaking of Carol Trent's grandfather, and presently he said, a little absent-mindedly:

"Bambina, is there really much talk about Mrs. Lindsay? . . . Oh, you go to the devil!" For his companion had burst into immoderate laughter.

"Flop! Like a fish," bubbled Pat. "I take him past the lair of the enchantress and his prepossession—isn't that what the psychological bugs call it?—bursts from

his suffering soul. Little Pat, the infant psycho-analyst. Bobs, are you crazy about Careth, like all the men—except Tom?"

"I like her," said Osterhout in a tone which brought Pat up short. When her friend and counselor used the word "like" with that quiet emphasis, Pat's flippant soul sobered into respect both for the feeling and, reflexively, for the person to whom it was applied.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because she's unhappy."

"Which is enough for you. Bobs, I'd like to hug you; you *are* such a lamb! Just the same, it's mostly bunk, liking people because they're unhappy. Has she been sobbing on your manly buzzum? Danger, Bobs, danger."

"No, she hasn't. She's game. But she doesn't need to tell."

"Nobody needs to tell you things. You see in the dark, you old owl of the human soul. But how-come you know so much about the perilous Careth?"

"She used to look after some of my poor patients. They adore her. She's a kind and gentle and good woman."

Pat stared. "She's a beautiful woman, which takes the place of all the rest in the minds of you stupid men," returned she, flippant once more. "As for being good—ask the tabby cats of Dorrisdale."

"There's more than one kind of goodness," said Osterhout shortly. "The tabbies don't know everything."

"They don't know as much as they tell," agreed Pat, "but they certainly do rough-tongue Careth Lindsay.

I don't think, myself, that she's any worse than the rest of the Dirty Dozen; only, she's too contemptuous of what people say or think to play safe."

"Contemptuous of life, perhaps."

"Don't know why she should be," argued Pat as they turned toward the station. "She's got heaps of money and a lovely house and a lot of men dippy over her and a husband who leaves her alone when she wants to be left alone——"

"And childless," he put in.

"Oh, that set's got no time for children, not even after they've had 'em. Chuck 'em in bed with a radio tied to their ears, and what's on for tonight? That's their game. I dunno but what it's as good a game as the next," averred Pat recklessly. "Anyway, they've got more zip than anything else in town." She waved a comradely hand at a passer-by whose face lighted up as he lifted his hat and half turned to look after her.

"Who's that blithe youth?" asked Bobs. "Haven't I seen him before?"

"Blithe is right. That's Warren Graves, the hero of my first and unannounced appearance in Dorrisdale society, and my first and *very* youthful love affair. D'you remember that party at the Knoll? It *was* a bingo!"

"Oh, yes; I remember now. What's he doing here?"

"Living and playing. And working when he isn't too much taken up with the other things."

"How did he happen to settle down in this place? I thought he was in the diplomatic service."

"Snapped out of it two years ago. He's settled here because he likes the place and he likes the pace and he

likes the set and he likes the club and—" she added impudently—"I'm not so sure but what he likes de-ah Little Pat pretty well."

"I hope de-ah little Pat isn't going to be a damned little fool," grumped Osterhout. "Cary——"

"If I feel any hunch to that effect coming on I'll run and tell my doctor-confessor all about it—in advance, this time," she twinkled. "Cary doesn't mind. He's always wanted me to play around with my own age. I think he figures that it gives him the advantage of contrast. It does, too. Oh, he's a deep one, that plotter that I married. He's so much more thoroughbred than the rest of 'em, Bobs, that they all look a little cheap when I come to compare 'em. Not Warren; he's the real thing, too. But I don't think that running with the Dozen helps much, for him. He's drinking quite a lot—oh, and he's one of Careth's danglers. I think she's filching him away from me. Oughtn't I, as a sworn member of the life-saving corps, to plunge in, despite all dangers, and——"

"You stick ashore where you belong, Bambina."

"Well, you get out of this here boat," she directed. "There's the train. I'll wait here. Be a diplomat now, Bobs, and try to look like a festooned arch with 'welcome' in the middle, no matter how much it hurts. Give her a warm, cousinly clinch, if you can stand it. I'll bet she's all spotty," she finished, with malicious pessimism.

By no means pleased with his errand, Dr. Osterhout walked up the platform looking about for his objective. No girl answering to his recollection of Carol Trent's dull and dimmed personality was among the few people

who had disembarked. Passing toward the rear in a final survey he collided with a slender, hurrying woman who had just come across the platform.

"I'm sorry," he apologized "Why, hello, Mrs. Lindsay!"

Recognition welled slowly up into her set eyes. "Dr. Bobs! How good to see you back!" She mustered up a smile. "I wish you'd come sooner," she said dreamily.

"You're not going away?"

She nodded, turned, and began to run toward the nearest steps, the train having started; groped at the rail, slipped, and was caught and lifted by a young man who had stood unobtrusively watching her. Osterhout returned to the waiting Pat.

"Well, where's Rollo, the Spot?" she greeted him.

"Didn't come. Pat, did you see Careth Lindsay?"

"I did. Both before and after she broke away from your tackle. Who was the bonny boy that boosted her onto the train?"

"New to me. I'd like to know what was the matter with her."

"Got caught at it finally," suggested the cynical Mrs. Scott. "Though it's pretty late in the morning for that—not to say late in the proceedings."

"And you talk about the tabbies!"

"Mee-ow is right," she admitted. "Well, she's certainly got something under her switch today. Came whizzing up to the curb, made a flying leap for the platform and she's off." She peered into the neighboring car. "Left her bag, too; that isn't like the calm and collected Careth. Hand it to me, Bobs, and go back and look for Rollo. She probably slipped right out from

under your stupid nose while you were googling at your lady. Try the baggage room. Maybe she's brought a trunk, coises on her!"

Nothing was found at the baggage room. The doctor stood scratching his ear when a grave, young voice behind him said:

"I believe you're my Cousin Bobs."

He pivoted, blinked, stared. "*I* don't," he said. "You're never——"

"Rollo. Why not?"

"You—you're so changed."

"You mean I'm pretty," returned the girl composedly.

"Setting aside prejudice, and family bias, and a slight dazzle of the eyes, *I* should say you're lovely," was the positive verdict.

She dimpled. "That's nice of you. I'm not, really. But I'm perfectly ready and willing to fool anybody I can into thinking so."

"You won't have much difficulty around here," he predicted. "Where did you pop up from? You weren't on the train."

"Wrong. I was."

"I looked at every car. You certainly didn't get out of any of 'em."

"Right. I was on the engine."

"I thought that was against the rules."

"It is. That's why."

"How did you work it?"

"Met the vice president of the road at a party last week and he made such hectic love to me that I told him it'd cost him a locomotive ride when I got ready to move. He tried to beg off for a private car or a special train

or anything else, but I told him nothing but a loco would do because I'd ridden everything else, and if he didn't come through I'd set everything he'd said to me to music and sing it to his— Right there I paused for effect. 'To my wife?' he said and gave me the laugh. 'She knows that song by heart.' 'No,' says little Rollo, 'to your children.' Whereupon he caves."

"I can see where you fit into Dorrisdale like a drink into a dry throat," announced Osterhout. "Also I can see that you've got a large splash of Fentriss in your blood. Did you like the ride?"

"Not so boring. The engineer was a lamb. Offered to get me elected an honorary sister of the Brotherhood, or something."

"What did you really do it for?"

"Because they said it couldn't be done, of course. Isn't that enough to inspire any self-respecting girl to go to it?"

Osterhout caressed his nose thoughtfully. "Dorrisdale has had its troubles before at the hands of your family. But I can see where— So you still call yourself Rollo?" he broke off.

"Do you know why?"

He had an inspiration. "Because you're going to show 'em that you can get away with the worst they could pin on you."

"The lad," approved Miss Trent, "is clev-vaw. I'm about to make the Fentriss girls *eat* that name. First bite to that young devil, Pat. Where is she?"

"Waiting in the car."

"I'm surprised she took the trouble even to meet me. I'll bet she's *plunged* over my coming. Don't deny it,

because you've got that guilty look that shows you were just about as sunk, yourself."

"She's going to have a shock," he prophesied.

"She is," agreed Carol Trent grimly, "if I can hand it to her. I've been in training for this, for old days' sake."

Bobs came loyally to the defense of the family. "After all, I don't remember that the girls were so rotten to you."

"Not rotten; they wouldn't dare have been with Cousin Mona around. Besides they're too game and too clanny not to stand for anyone of the breed. So they hauled me along dutifully, but they hated having a set brake like me always cramping their speed and couldn't help showing it. Can you blame me for hating them, because they had good clothes and plenty of money and lots of boys crazy about them and I hadn't anything but a big lump of envy and jealousy and—and hurtness way down inside me?"

"Poor kid! But you seem to have landed on your feet finally."

"I have and I'm going to stay there. This place owes me something. Watch me collect!"

"But I'm not going to let you hurt Pat, you know," said he slowly. "Not that I know what you've got in mind."

"Ah! I'd forgotten that Cousin Mona left the girls as a legacy to you, especially Pat. No; I don't really want to hurt her. I'm not vengeful. And I did love Cousin Mona." His face softened, and she was quick to seize her opportunity. "Don't you think"—she smiled up at him—"you could be prevailed upon to take

me on, now that you've got them all married and off your hands?"

"I'm a slow old pelican beside you youngsters; but I'll do my best."

"It's a pact," said she, "if I stay. Now you go ahead and don't report me present. I want to make an entry."

"Where the devil have you been all this time, Bobs?" demanded the aggrieved Pat. She had jumped out of the car and was moving toward him with her adorable, boyish slouch.

As he mumbled something indefinite he saw her eyes widen and her slim body stiffen like a setter coming to a point. Carol Trent had just come around the corner of the station. From a setter Pat changed abruptly into a terrier, alert, suspicious, a picture of nervous preparedness. Bobs could almost see her nose twinkle. Two terriers now, Bobs perceived, for Carol's bearing had altered to match her cousin's. Was it to be battle? Pat stopped. Carol came on, erect, easy, confident, challenging. Bobs guessed that she was humming beneath her breath. Then Pat spoke.

"Well, I *am* damned!" said she in accents of profound, almost of pious wonder, as one who stands awed before some incomparable marvel of Nature.

Carol Trent laughed, Osterhout drew a breath of relief. "Hello, Pat," greeted the visitor and held out her hand.

"No, you don't!" said Pat, brushed the hand aside, grabbed the owner, shook her lightly, and kissed her. "*How* did you do it?" she demanded.

"Do what?" But the sweet, shrewd mouth was quivering with amusement.

"Everything," cried Pat, waving wild arms.

"Oh, that's a long, sad story, and you might not understand it and I've got a souvenir of my trip in the shape of a beast of a cinder in my eye——"

"Bobs'll snare it out," promised Pat confidently. "Pop in and we'll run home and have an L.L.D. before the operation."

"A what?"

"Lucky little drink," explained Pat. "A D.D. is a dud drink, meaning non-alcoholic swill, and a Ph.D. is——"

"A fizzy drink, I suppose. But I'm no morning sipper."

"Neither am I, clever child. But this is a festive occasion, and you'll need a bracer to endure what this torturer is going to do to you."

At the Knoll Dr. Osterhout twitched the obtrusive cinder out in no time but did not at once release the lid. When he did it was only to peer into the other eye. "Ever have any trouble?" he asked. "Strain or anything like that?"

"Just a little duskish feeling when I'm tired," she answered. "But I won't wear glasses so you needn't think it."

"I should think not!" Pat came to her support indignantly. "She's got better use for those eyes than just *seeing* with 'em."

"Well, you might drop around and let me take a look one of these days," said he offhandedly. "Not that I'm an oculist, but I've got a few instruments."

"I *won't* wear glasses," repeated the girl obstinately. "Thanks for heaving the coal out of my system." She gave him a smile which made Pat add several points to her already high estimate of her cousin's formidable potentialities. "Pals, Cousin Bobs?" she asked.

"Pals," he assented soberly.

Leaving the room she drew his gaze after her until Pat, the impertinent, catching him by the chin forcibly diverted his look toward herself.

"What do you mean by it, Lord Roberts?" she cried indignantly. "If you're going to dare to like Rollo better than me, I'll chuck her tomorrow."

"Stand up straight," admonished Osterhout, giving her a whack across the shoulders that jarred the tears into her eyes, "and don't talk splosh."

"Oh, all *right!*" said Pat contentedly. "But what do you really think of her, Bobs?"

Having been giving no small consideration to that very point, he delivered his verdict oracularly.

"A highly competent young person," said Dr. Bobs. "*Highly* competent."

CHAPTER II

Having dropped into the nearest seat of the car, Careth Lindsay looked about her. She always made this preliminary survey wherever she was: it was the natural, naïve expression of an untainted and restless interest in everything; something more than mere intellectual curiosity, rather an exigency to know what life might have in wait for her around the next corner. It was at once the challenge and the questing of the unsatisfied woman.

Across the aisle sat the man who had helped her up the steps. He was inoffensively studying her; looked as if he would like to speak to her. Men often looked at her that way. She did not mind—quite expected it, indeed—so long as they went no further, and if they did her disdainful disregard was impregnable This man interested her. With the skill of the woman sure of her defenses she presently let him see that she had noted his scrutiny, whereupon he at once buried himself in his magazine, which was what she had intended. A gentleman, then, she thought, and set herself to reckon him up. Not the type of her own easy-living, casually luxurious set, evidently. His clothes were incipiently threadbare, but they fitted him with wrinkleless ease. Keen in her estimates, especially of the male sex, she inferred that he was one of those who would prefer little and that of the best, to more of inferior quality. Her own fastidiousness respected this evidence of the instinctive aristocrat. Poor he plainly was, by Dorris-

dale standards, but he would carry his poverty, not with an air, indeed—which was no more than inverted braggadocio—but negligently. For his face, which she analyzed last, she could find no other term than beauty; and she hated male beauty; she had had her surfeit of it. But his rich darkness had none of the saturnine romanticism characteristic of very handsome men of his coloring. Instead it showed forth the clear candor usually typical of quite early manhood. He made her think of a nice, clean, untroubled boy—and then she got, by a swift, intuitive perceptiveness, the meaning of the small lines beneath the temples, the sharp set of the jaw, the slight contraction of the brows, and knew there was firm stuff under the almost too perfect exterior. He was slight, small, quick, and strong; the latter attributes she had perceived when he had caught her. As for his status—married? She thought not. Profession? Not a lawyer, nor a business man, nor a physician, probably——

"Tickuts, please."

Startled out of her temporary absorption in the stranger, and not overpleased with herself at realizing how deep it was, she put out her hand for her bag and discovered her loss. As she rarely went to town except in her motor, the conductor did not know her. He was polite but noncommittal, and he evidently expected either a ticket or cash, neither of which she had. She was sardonically wondering whether they put people off trains in lonely spots for not paying their way when she became aware of the stranger.

"Do you mind if I have him take an extra bite out of my ticket?" he asked.

She looked up at him with her slow-blossoming smile, "Are you going to save my life twice in one day?"

"It's my best chance for the Carnegie medal, up to date."

"What a disillusionment! I was giving you credit for pure altruism. As yours is a Dorrisdale commutation, I take it we're neighbors." She retracted her skirt a little with a movement like a moth folding in soft wings and nodded toward the seat beside her. "And therefore prospective acquaintances."

"It doesn't necessarily follow, does it?" he replied, taking the seat.

"Are you a professed hermit, then?" she asked mockingly.

"Oh, no! But you, I should guess, can hardly know everybody in Dorrisdale, and I'm to be reckoned among the everybodies rather than the somebodies."

She half turned to regard him from beneath her veined, veiling lids. "I just don't believe it," she returned flatly.

He let the matter lapse as if it were hardly worth further discussion. "You've lost your purse?" he inquired solicitously.

"Left it in my car, I'm afraid. You've got a penniless pauper on your hands."

"That's easily fixed."

"Oh, very easily." A malign spirit took possession of Careth Lindsay's soul, inspiring her with a perverse desire to humiliate and hurt this man whose serenity of spirit she had already guessed and resented, to make herself vitally felt by him though it were only through injury. "And it would be awfully convenient. I had

something like five hundred dollars in my bag. If you could?" She looked at him, mockingly expectant.

He chuckled. "Does my architecture remind you of the First National Bank?"

"Oh, well," she modified. "Fifty would do, at a pinch."

"The pinch," he stated, "would be on me. I'm sorry." Regretful but quite unembarrassed.

Careth's mood changed. "I was joking, of course. If you'll just let me have ten——"

He spread upon his knee a thin oblong of bills followed by some silver. "One—two—three," he counted. "Twenty-five, fifty—mm-mm-mm, sixty-seven; grand total $3.67. Will you have the three?"

Her face flushed with annoyance, shamed reflexively by this crass exposure of his poverty. "Oh, I couldn't think of it," she replied hastily, and knew at once that it was the wrong thing to have said. "I mean—it was stupid of me. I can get along very well." She stopped, furious at herself for her footlessness. She, Careth Lindsay, who prided herself upon *never* blundering with a man.

"Without a cent?" he corrected, quite undisturbed. "This'll pay your taxi to your husband's office——"

"I don't want to go to my husband's office. He—he isn't in town."

"To your bank, then."

"I don't bank in New York."

His face brightened with the ingenuous satisfaction of a clever solution. "I do. We'll go to mine."

Mischievous curiosity supplanted her discomfort. How far would he go? "And get me my five hundred?"

"Don't believe I've got more than four. You're welcome to that."

Something impelled her to a further question quite foreign to her normally uncaring temperament. "Are you just playing at being poor?"

"It's every cent I've got in the world."

"And you'd turn it over unquestioningly to a woman you've never set eyes on before! What are you; a fool?" she demanded harshly.

He looked startled. "I should be if I couldn't see that you're all right. Any man would trust a face like yours." ("Good God!" she said inwardly, appalled, for men had trusted that face before in things more vital than money.) "Besides, I heard your name at the station. You're Mrs. Lindsay, aren't you?"

"Yes; I'm Careth Lindsay. And you?"

"Careth," he echoed. "Careth. What a lovable name. I'd like to have known the mother that thought of it," he added quaintly. . . . "Oh, my name? Dorr Manning."

It meant nothing to her. "Why were you waiting for me at the car-steps, Mr. Manning? And why did you sit there waiting for a chance to speak to me?"

"Did I stare? I'm sorry. I did want to speak to you. I thought you looked as if you might be in trouble."

"And you considered that sufficient basis——"

"Isn't it?"

"Ah, I see. You're one of these modern knights who go about proffering succor to damsels who they think are in dire straits. Is that it?"

"No," said he shortly.

"Having got that poisonous speech out of my sys-

tem," she chuckled, "and a rise out of you, I'll now admit that I'm glad to have someone to talk to. My nerves are rather shot. And it isn't often that they get uppish and give me any back-talk. But how did you guess?"

"You came across the platform like a blind person."

"Observant like a telescope! You really mean it about that five—that four hundred?"

"Yes."

"Sure?" she persisted. Her eyes, glowing, exigent, demanding, withholding while they demanded, searching as for an oracle, explored his face; troubled, troubling eyes of secret and changeful loveliness.

"Of course."

She sighed lightly, as one for whom some course is settled. "And now," she murmured, "I want to think."

"Shall I go back?"

"No. Stay if you don't mind. I want to feel something friendly near me. Is friendly too much of an assumption?" For the moment her mobile face was wistful.

"Nothing is too much that you could ask."

She looked at him in doubt, with a touch of expectancy. It was almost a lover-like speech, cast in that current coin of exchange to which she was best accustomed. But he had nothing of that atmosphere, or the effect of the man making tentative advances into the *pays du tendre*. She told herself that she liked it better so.

Closing her eyes, she leaned back. Thus he had full opportunity of studying her. Perhaps, he thought, that was what she intended. Well, if it was, he at least knew

the game. He promptly recovered his magazine and lost himself in it. Being of that type of woman which can see with its eyes closed she noted this with considerable annoyance. The rest of the journey passed in silence.

At the terminal he excused himself, returning with good news. "Mrs. Cary Scott has your bag. She left word with the station master."

"You *are* thoughtful. Shall we walk to the bank? I want air."

"I want more than that," he laughed. "Don't you think that luncheon would be more filling?"

"Yes; I do," she answered, relieved, for she had been forecasting with dread a solitary luncheon time of thought and forward-reckoning. Even though he took her to some awful dump, which was probable, in view of his exchequer——

"Andre's used to be good," he remarked.

"Still is. Nicest luncheon place in town." Inwardly she was a little scornfully amused at herself for her misgivings: she might have known that whatever he did, he would do it right. At the bank he turned over the money to her without comment. The restaurant was only two blocks further. As they were early, there was no difficulty about a table. "Will you have a cocktail, to start?" he asked.

"I'll have two. I'm rather down today." He gave the order. "But where's yours?"

"You'll have to let me off."

"Principle? Or in training?"

"Well—yes. I am in training."

"You look it," she approved. "I'm relieved to know that it isn't principle since that would make you disap-

prove of my reckless dissipation. And I hate to be disapproved of."

"I can't see myself disapproving of anything you might choose to do, Mrs. Lindsay."

"Oh, can't you!" thought Careth, and then a reckless inward sequel, for she had not altogether liked his tone. "I'll show you before this day is over!" Aloud she said, "That sounds about as friendly as a prickly-pear."

"Anything else would be an impertinence, wouldn't it?"

"I'll bet you were brought up by an aged and lofty grandfather of the old school," she laughed. "Are you always so hopelessly correct?"

"Meaning priggish."

"Not you—though I don't know why you aren't. Listen, Mr. Man, you—I mean, Mr. Manning—you aren't by any extraordinary chance going to make me respect you, are you?" She gave him a sidelong glance which, without her volition, turned into a point-blank look of inquiry and somber speculation.

"It's a chilling prospect," he replied.

"Doesn't send any shivers down my spine; it's too unusual. Countermand that second cocktail, please." To his uplifted brows she explained, "I'm getting kick enough out of this tête-à-tête, thank you, without extra stimulus. And something tells me that I'd better keep my wits about me if I'm not to give myself completely away." ("Which," continued her thought, after the words had ceased, "you're just itching to do, Careth, you imbecile, and probably will do. What's the matter with you, anyway?")

They ate and talked leisurely, feeling each other out like two friendly boxers with mutual respect for the other's skill. Yet, in spite of being on her toes, mentally, Careth felt a sense of restfulness creep over the subdued turmoil in which her spirit had been plunged. Careth-like she expressed it by indirection.

"This is a very extraordinary performance."

"Lunching together?"

"Oh, that's a commonplace for me. What I meant was, my taking money from a total stranger."

He made a little movement, less than a gesture, of deprecation, as if saying what did it matter. Good sportsmanship! Considering that she had fairly gutted his slender bank account.

"Very well," she interpreted, "then you're bringing it on yourself. Do you think you could bear it to be less of a stranger, just for the day and hour?" Her voice was softly daring.

"Try me."

"I'm wondering whether you would have given me the money if you had known what I was going to do with it."

"Am I expected to ask you what you are going to do with it?"

"Don't you think you have a right to know?"

"I can't imagine what right."

"The right of the investor," she mocked. "You're investing something in my future. Don't you *want* to know?" she queried with feminine resentment at his aloofness.

"Yes," he answered. No aloofness about that; too prompt and positive.

"I'm running away."

"From your husband?"

"Yes."

He thought a moment before answering. "In that case I probably wouldn't have given you the money."

"Would you like it back?"

He flushed. "I don't like the way you said that."

"But you've condemned me without hearing my side of the case."

"Do you want to tell it to me?"

"I might have. But I don't, now." She tucked the roll of bills beneath her serviette and thrust it over to him.

"Let it lie, for the moment."

"Oh, no! The court has already decided. Against me."

"The court would like to be further enlightened. Children?"

"No. If there were, I'd fight, not run. I'm not yellow."

"I believe that." He fell to musing, not looking at her. She examined his thought-burdened face; believed that she read his conjectures. Her lips flattened; her eyes hardened. "Haven't you another question, a perfectly logical question?"

"What?"

" 'Lover?' " she supplied with an edge on her voice.

"Why should I ask you that?"

"I'll tell you if you do ask," she retorted, harshly, insistently. "I'll tell you the truth. . . ."

"Are you going to meet a lover?" The words clogged in the utterance, dragged out of him against the cur-

rent of his intention. He set a cupped hand to his temple, his forehead corrugated into deep wrinkles.

Careth Lindsay's breath caught in a choke of dismay. "Don't!" she whispered. "Don't look like that!" Her eyes were dark and veiled and haunted. A strange pallor had stricken the vividness from her face, leaving it a dulled mask of terror.

He pushed a glass of water toward her. "You're overwrought," said he soothingly. "Take a swallow of that and close your eyes for thirty seconds."

"It isn't what you think. Have I ever seen you before?"

"Not that I know of."

"When you put your hand up, when that look of—of physical hurt distorted your face"— Her words hurried and stumbled as if to overtake and fix an evanishing picture before it could escape them— "I saw you so plainly—in a great glare of light—staggering, blinded—with the blood streaming—and spreading—ah-h-h-h! Do you believe in prescience, in second sight?"

"That's nerves," he pronounced confidently.

"Probably." She was reassuming control of herself now, but terror still haunted the beauty of her eyes. "Nevertheless—oh, well, it doesn't matter." She hardened herself into her former mood. "Well, are you going to act as the beneficent sub-agency of my downfall?"

His eyes dared hers to meet them. "I don't believe you've got a lover."

"How unflattering! Dorrisdale credits me with at least three, but they've never been able to pin it on me

with anyone. So the rest of the crowd think I'm just cleverer, not more moral than they are."

In spite of the steely cynicism of her tone he repeated, "I don't believe it."

"Why? Do I look too respectable?"

"No. You look too—too . . . You're like a person who hasn't yet found what she's seeking," he substituted.

Her eyes darkened and brooded upon him with a flash of something not far short of dread. "How could you—" She did not finish. "But if I were going to a lover and needed that money for the trip, would you still leave it there for me?"

"Yes."

"And why?"

"Because I know that if you deliberately set out on such a course, you'd finish it if you had to walk from here to Chicago, and nothing could stop you."

Her face softened into weariness. "There's no man in the case. I'm running away just to get away."

"From yourself?"

She jerked herself upright. "Do you think it's myself I'm trying to run away from?"

"Do we ever really try to run away from anything else?"

"Ah, you make it seem so hopeless!" said she in a fierce whisper. Then, in profound dejection, "You've spoiled everything."

"I'm glad."

"You want me to go back?"

"That's what I want—if it isn't a butt-in."

"A butt-in!" She laughed curtly. "It's a wash-out. I hate Tom."

"You've quarreled perhaps."

"We don't quarrel. Too far apart. It just got to a point where I deliberately set out to throw up the job and——"

"Deliberately?"

"Now, just what's the meaning of that?"

"I doubt whether there was any deliberation in it," he replied, himself speaking very deliberately and with his eyes upon hers. "Exasperation perhaps, but not the other. Didn't you get up this morning without any such notion," he continued persuasively, "and because some little thing happened—or perhaps because nothing happened and nothing does happen that seems worth while to you nowadays, all of a sudden the whole show seemed petty and sordid and stale and you made a grab for your things and broke for the open?"

"You're positively weird," she breathed. "It's uncanny."

"No. Only a trick of character guessing. If I can read faces and motions at all—there's more than is generally known, by the way, in the way people move and use their hands and their bodies, a sort of unconscious muscle-expression, if one knows how to read it—you're a well-poised character and normally a reticent character. Therefore when I see you come stumbling across a platform, and discover that you've left your purse which is all your apparent luggage, and finally"—he smiled—"find you honoring a stranger with highly interesting if not always authentic details,

I conclude there's been some sort of nerve-explosive impulse."

"You mean I've been making a fool of myself," interpreted she, between annoyance and an unaccustomed humility.

"Not in what's passed between us," he returned quickly.

"But in what's passed between me and myself."

"More or less."

"Are you a psychologist, Mr. Manning?"

"I have to be, a little, in my work."

"You haven't told me a thing about yourself—how could the poor man, when I was babbling about myself every minute? But what is your work?"

"I'm the new man at the Brick Church."

She had a sharp recoil. "At the Brick Church?" she repeated.

"Yes; but not——"

"Oh, I see the point of your knightly interest now," she broke in scathingly. "Purely professional. Out after souls; and all this time you doubtless flatter yourself you've been saving mine."

"How could *I* save *your* soul?" he asked slowly.

"How could I have been so stupid as not to make you out before!" she pursued. "Ten per cent spiritual commission on every brand snatched from the burning, I suppose."

A gleam of very human anger brightened his eyes. "You seem to have a peculiarly commercialized point of view," he observed.

At that she laughed, and much of her bitterness, the bitterness of taut nerves, melted in the laughter.

"Lacerated vanity," she confessed. "I was stupid enough to believe that you felt some slight personal interest in me and not——"

"I do," he said promptly, "eliminating the 'slight.' "

"—and not just as a salvageable soul, if I've got such a thing left."

"As a woman I'm sorry for."

"I don't want your sorrow or your pity," she retorted sullenly and at the same time pleadingly.

He answered the tone. "Do you want my friendship?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. Then I'm going to put you to the test by presuming on it."

"I doubt if you would presume."

"To urge you to go back home."

She reverted slyly to her former exacerbated idea. "Are you giving pious advice as a clergyman to a soul?"

"As a man."

"To a woman?" It had all the challenge of straight simplicity, and his answer was attuned to it.

"Yes. If you like."

"I'll go."

She returned all his money but five dollars. "There endeth one episode," she averred, "and beginneth—what?"

He offered no prophecy, but said, instead: "You've given me your confidence today."

"It was given to the man, not the clergyman," she answered jealously.

"And now I want you to understand that what you've said to me is forever forgotten."

She laid a lightly trustful hand on his arm as they reached the sidewalk. "*You* forget," she prescribed. "I shan't. I don't want to."

"And," he continued, "I want to tell you something else that I tried to tell you at first. I'm not a clergyman. I'm in charge of the new Boys' Club of the church and its athletic activities."

"Oh, well!" She was visibly relieved. "That isn't so bad."

He laughed a little ruefully. "Apparently you don't think much of religion. And I'm afraid I try to be just as religious, as I understand it, as if I were a regularly ordained clergyman. You have to be if you're dealing with young boys; they're so darn straight and clean themselves."

"Do you? Well, I could stand that—just so you haven't got the earmarks of the common or garden soul-snatcher and Godsaker. They're even more boring for week-day use than the average clergyman. I must admit, you're human."

"There are times when I suspect it," he rejoined dryly.

"Sometime when you feel one of those spells coming on, you might come to see me," she suggested.

"I'd be delighted."

"We live in Magruder Park Lane."

"I know. The tall young house with wings."

The swift, unexpected thrill that she felt got into her voice as she cried, "I adore that! It sounds so seraphy. How would 'Seraph's Nest' do for a name

for the place? No," she vetoed herself. "It's too happy."

"But it was built happily, that house."

"Oh, yes. There were dreams put into it. And the architect, at least, had a good time," was the cynical response. "Are you going to take me to the train now?"

"Yes." He signaled a taxi and they got in.

"Here," she remarked, "is where I ought to call you my noble preserver and thank you with tears in my voice and say I don't know how I can ever repay the service you've done me. But be of good cheer; I'm not going to. For one thing I'm not at all sure it isn't a great disservice that you're doing me in the name of morality and the sacredness of the home and all that. I hope you appreciate your own temerity in taking on the responsibility for a life that you know nothing about. . . . *Don't* put your hand up to your forehead that way again," she cried sharply. She moved closer to him, breathing quick. "There's something about all this that's beyond me. What brings you to Dorrisdale—just now?"

"If I'm to answer literally, I should say it was Maxwell Slater."

"Is Max a friend of yours?"

"We were on the hockey team together, and afterward in France."

"Hockey?" Remembrance lighted her eyes. "Ah, I've got the picture now! You're Flash Manning."

"Fame *is* enduring!" he laughed. "I was, ten years ago."

"That's how I've seen you in that posture." She

set her hand to her brow, imitating his unconscious gesture. "In the final game when you were badly hurt and came staggering across the ice almost into my lap—and me an athlete-worshiping kid. No wonder I remembered and was startled. And yet," her voice became doubtful and wondering again, "it wasn't like memory just now. Memory's backward, and this seemed to flash forward. It must mean—something." Her eyes raised themselves to his. "I have a notion that what I'm going to say now is important, awfully important. It isn't too late to give me back the money and let me go my own way." Her two small hands dropped upon his forearm and fastened there with amazing and painful strength. "Think! Will you let me go, Dorr Manning?"

"No."

She jumped from the taxi and held out her hand. "All right. But I think we're going to pay a price for this, you and I."

CHAPTER III

. . . Mile after mile after weary mile. No matter how her feet ached, her lungs agonized, her muscles rebelled. Across fields of clogging mud, through fences, over walls, on, on, on, driven in an insane and savage dream toward a blank goal. . . . A road. Roads were bad. They led somewhere. People traveled them, people who would stop and say, "Why, you're Miss Trent, aren't you? Are you ill?" and want to take her back and put her in a house with four walls, four closing-in, smothering walls, where the strained vision strives to get outside and is forever balked. To see, to comprehend—that was what she had to do now; to see everything, to drink it in, absorb it, enfiber it within her being, feed her starving soul with it all, land, sky, woods, fields, hills, the unearthly pattern of far-away roads, the wintry blue of the lake, everything. To crowd her brain with it.

A hill beyond the road, rising abruptly. If she could gain that, she could encompass more with her vision. A motor car swerved to avoid her as she darted and stumbled. Two men shouted angrily, frightenedly. As if it mattered! Perhaps, though, they would follow her; the car was slowing down. She fled into the brush; scrabbled and doubled like a harried rabbit; got to the sheltered side of the rocky slope; strove upward with stringent, panting breath; slipped, clambered, crawled, conquered, and stood, momentarily triumphant on the crest, a creature of beauty and terror against

the sunlit glaze of the sky. . . . To look. Just to look. To gorge the eye.

A voice from somewhere. An insistent voice, as impertinent and intrusive as the rasp of a hornet against a window pane. Calling her. By name. What had she to do with summons, with sounds? She did not want to hear, but to see, see, see. She shook her head angrily. The voice had given up, now, but there was a rustling in the brush below. The pursuer was climbing, swiftly and easily that slope which had cost her such anguish of fugitive effort. She would have liked to roll a rock down on him. Kill him, perhaps. They put you in prison for killing people. Well, what would that matter to her? . . . Not worth while, though.

"Carol. Carol Trent."

Carol? Nobody in Dorrisdale was an old enough friend to call her by her discarded name except Dorr Manning. This, then, was Dorr. The near-minister. One of the helpful. A lieutenant of God. And they had sent him after her. She began to laugh. Perhaps he would try to talk to her about God. Let him! *She* could tell him some things about God!

He burst through the last fringe of brush. He was bare-headed and panting lightly and there were two reddening furrows across his face where a briar had slashed at him. With her abnormally intensified vision she noticed that his face was anxious and seamed with deep lines as if of sleeplessness. A beautiful face, too, and beauty was something to be seized upon and absorbed whether in a human face or in the broad spread of land and waters; to be impressed on the mind

and so made one's own. No wonder that Careth Lindsay had fallen in love with him, as Dorrisdale gossip said. Was he in love with her? And was that what had set the lines of pain and strain at the corners of the sensitive mouth? She marveled at herself that she was capable, at such a time, even of considering another's problems or troubles.

He looked at her, frowning, doubtful, troubled. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Why did you follow me?"

"I didn't follow you. I caught sight of you from the road."

"Did Bobs send you after me?" she persisted, intent upon her idea of pursuit.

"Dr. Osterhout?" He looked puzzled. "No. Have you been ill?"

"Ill! Look at me." She threw her arms above her head, stretching and curving like a splendid young animal. "I'm pulsing, throbbing with life and health and strength." She added as if confidentially, "That's what makes the joke of it."

Understanding only that here was a critical situation, he had the tact to wait in silence.

"Just a rotten joke," she pursued. "Played on me by the God that you pretend is a just and merciful Being, to be adored and worshiped and prayed to. Oh, I used to pray. Never again! Not to Him. All I can think of is a huge, sinister cat up there playing with poor, broken human creatures for his own pleasure. That's my picture. Can you better it?"

"Yes," he said quietly.

"Well, go on, then. Do it," she defied.

He sat down on the crest-rock and let his feet swing over, waiting.

"He's been playing His little tricks on you, too, hasn't He!" she went on. With a ruthless finger she traced the harsh gravings that were so incongruous with the youthful beauty of his face. "Because you've tried to be straight and decent and helpful to other people, that's what He's done to you. That's Careth," she added and felt him quiver under her hand. "Hurts, doesn't it? Well, you've got to get dulled against pain in this world if you're going to make out to live at all, and then it isn't worth while. Aren't you going to ask what's happened to me?"

"No."

"Afraid to hear? Afraid it'll weaken your touching faith in the eternal goodness of things?"

He looked up at her and did not again release her from the encompassment of his gaze. In it there was so much friendliness that the stricture of her features was loosened. She dropped down beside him. "I'm going to tell you in a minute."

She slid a hand through his arm, felt it gripped hard in his own. She lapsed against him, dropping her head on his shoulder like a tired, wretched child. Below, in the roadway, an automobile passed and a derisive face, outthrust, regarded them with a grin, but Dorr did not move. After a time the girl sighed, straightened up, and said in a conversational tone:

"Thank you, Dorr. I'm going blind. In six months. That's all."

"I don't believe it," he said numbly. "I can't believe it."

"It's true. Bobs took me down to see Von Steinmetz. He told me. I made him."

"There must be some mistake. Doctors don't know everything. It's too horrible."

"Horrible? When it's the doing of that all-righteous and loving God of yours? Don't be impious, Dorr," she taunted.

"I—I don't know what to say to you, Carol."

"No text ready-made for this little situation?" Her voice broke into passionate reproach. "Why has He done it to me? Why should I be punished? I've been straight and decent and fair, Dorr. And life hasn't been too easy for me until the last three years, and not even then. You know how it's been with me; I've taken the money that came to me and made myself with it; trained myself like an athlete to make my mind intelligent and my body attractive. That's the pride of the flesh, I suppose," she sneered. "Tell me I'm being justly punished for my sins, why don't you? I want to laugh! . . . And now I'm going to be blown out, puff! like a candle. Why, Dorr? Why, why, why?"

"Blindness—" he gulped a little over the terrific word—"isn't death."

"No; it's worse. Or it would be if I were weak and submissive enough to lie down and take it."

He understood the defiance. "You can't quit under fire."

"Why can't I?" she retorted. "What's to stop me? I haven't got any near relations or family, thank God. Nobody's dependent on me for anything—love,

loyalty, help. It used to make me feel lonely. Now I'm glad."

"Oh, no," said he gently. "No life is independent to that degree. We're in the game for some purpose or other. As we don't know what it is, our only job is to play it through the best we can."

"Are you going to preach at me, Dorr Manning?"

"Is it likely?"

"No; it isn't. You don't preach your religion. You live it."

A heavy shadow passed across his face, but he recovered himself and went on: "I know another case something like yours, a good friend of mine. He's doing a work, in his quiet way, that may be—well—" He seemed to be choosing his terms with care, as if to avoid possible identification of the subject—"that may add something valuable to the total of human knowledge. There was a danger involved, and the danger has become a reality; in fact a certainty. The fact that he has only a short time to live hasn't diminished his sense of responsibility; it's only given him the devotion of the martyr."

"And I suppose he's turned to religion for support," she gibed.

"Such religion as he's got; work, usefulness. It's a pretty fine religion."

"Ah, but there it is! He's got something to do in life."

"How do you know you haven't?"

"How do I know that what I might do wouldn't be harm instead of good?"

"That's not your affair or responsibility," he returned quickly.

"Well, I've got my little time left; I know what I'm going to do with it."

"Do you? Does anybody?"

"Watch me! I'm going to squeeze that orange dry and mix it up with all I can get of life and adventure and experience and thrill, and drink the cocktail to the last drop, and let the next-day feeling go to the devil. There ain't gonna be no next day; that's the joke of it. There isn't anything to be considered; no ties, no responsibilities, no rewards or punishments, not even any petty respectabilities or social superstitions. You keep your best eye fixed on the spotlight in Dorrisdale, my boy, and if you see a large and gaping hole right through the middle of the rules, laws, regulations and proprieties, peek into it and you'll perceive little Rollo sitting pretty amidst the wreckage. Being free does have its compensations."

"Who else knows about this? Your case, I mean."

"Nobody except Bobs—Dr. Osterhout. He won't breathe it, and you're not to. On honor, Dorr."

He nodded. "You haven't told the Scotts?"

"What kind of a rotter do you take me for? Pat would be sunk. Cary, too."

He smiled this time with melancholy admiration. "You see how your theory of non-participation collapses as soon as it's tried out. It won't work, Carol. You can no more help considering other people than you can help breathing But you've got to consider yourself in this, too If you try to keep it inside you

without any outlet, you'll break. It'll be too much for you."

"No; it won't. I've lived with it four days, and if I did break today it was because Pat Scott has suspected something, and began to get dangerously near sympathetic; so I ran away. I can go through with it now."

"Then you're more than human."

"I told you once about my upbringing, on the hardening theory. I'm trained as hard spiritually as you are physically, Dorr," she added grimly. "A good thing, too; it's about all I've got left. I'll ask no favors from any God and from now on I take all that life owes me and more if I can get it."

"No," he denied. "You can't—being you—take without giving."

She was struck by this. "All right, then; I'll give." She smiled darkly. "I'll give as recklessly as I take. Is that what you want me to do?"

"Better that than the other. Carol, I wish there were some man that you cared for."

"Thank God, there isn't! That *would* be the final knockout."

"It might be the solution."

"Do you think I'd drape myself around a man I cared for, for life? To hang on him like a dead weight, a shambling, fumbling, half-dead imitation of a woman?"

"If he loved you enough and you loved him enough. If he were the right man——"

"Oh, if he were someone like you, a combination of angel and good sport . . . it's a sweetly Christian little

idea; but where does the sacrificial lamb get off?" A vicious challenge sharpened her voice. "Would *you* like to take on the job? Would you marry me, now that you know the facts?"

"Yes" he said. She could perceive no hesitancy.

"Now? Today?"

"Yes."

"What for? My money?" She felt a perverse instinct to hurt him.

"What do I want of your money?" he returned angrily.

"Oh, not for yourself, I expect. But for that precious club of yours. Think what you could do for that, with a blind wife's fortune."

"I don't happen to have been thinking of that."

"I'd give something to know what you were thinking of. Careth Lindsay probably. You'd marry me to save yourself and your conscience from Careth."

"Will you be good enough to leave Mrs. Lindsay out of this?"

"I believe she belongs in it," retorted the girl mutinously. "Well, if it isn't escape from her, what is it?"

He hesitated a moment before answering: "Call it the hope of keeping you from taking a foolish and irrevocable step."

"And for that purpose you're willing to sacrifice yourself for a woman you don't love," she cried. "Who appointed you the savior of my soul or—" she added deliberately—"of my body? Marry you? I'd rather go on—" Her voice broke and sank. "Oh, Dorr;

I'm being a bum sport, I know; have a little patience with me."

He considered her gravely, pityingly. "You've got to have some outlet," he decided. "Someone you can talk to or at when the pressure gets too great. Will you come and talk to me?"

Instantly she hardened again. "I'm not employing a spiritual adviser this season."

"Call it a safety valve."

"I'll probably blaspheme, if I let myself go at all."

"God can stand it," he smiled. "He can make allowances if He's the kind of God I think He is."

"All right." Her lips retracted like those of a fierce animal in terror and challenge. "Then may I be God-damned——"

"That's silly," he broke in equably. "There's no such thing as being God-damned. There may be such a thing as being self-damned."

"And that's what you're trying to save me from. Well, I don't want to be saved, thank you."

"Will you do this, Carol; just for old friendship; before you definitely cut loose, come around and let's talk things over?"

"This is my game and I play it alone," she returned doggedly.

"Then I can't be of any help at all? That's tough."

"Is it, Dorr?" She softened. "If the pressure gets too great, and *if* you'll promise not to interfere, I may come and slump myself on your chest from time to time, though I doubt it. It's mostly out of my system now, thanks to you. You don't want to be

thanked, though, do you, Dorr? Of course not. I'm ready to go back now, I think."

He rose and gave her a hand up. She slid her fingers to his shoulders, held him so for a moment, and kissed him straightly on the lips. "That's good-by," said she gravely, "to the Carol Trent that Dorr Manning knew. Rollo Trent is another person from now on. Now, let's hit up the pace and not talk."

They footed it home in silence, except once when she stopped short.

"Dorr!"

"Yes?"

"I believe you're praying."

"I was."

"For me?"

"Yes."

"Don't," she said with a sob, and walked on.

CHAPTER IV

"Pat," said Rollo Trent, "what would you do if you found out that the whole show was going to crash in a couple of weeks?"

"The whole show? Oh, that old end-of-the-world wheeze," said Patricia Scott lazily. "Crash with it, I suppose. Flip me a hump, will you, Rol?"

Rollo tossed over the cigarette of the specified brand. The two girls, the married and the unmarried, were lolling, diaphanously and luxuriously underclad, in the scented warmth of the big upstairs room that had been Mona Fentriss's and was now her youngest daughter's. Pat had never let it be altered in the smallest degree. Though Mona had died, still in the bloom of her quenchless womanhood, nearly five years before, some strange and tenuous lien of spirit held firm between the dead and the living woman: Pat, entering that room which she never thought of except as permanently Mona's, could dream back into the potent influence of the old light and tender companionship, the old slack-reined and laughing but nevertheless astute guidance.

The cousins had dined at home alone, prefatory to going to a dance, Cary Scott being away on a business trip.

"Naturally; we all would," Rollo answered her companion's answer. "But I didn't mean the end of the world, necessarily."

Pat reflected. "Whatever it was, Mona'd get an advance tip over to me if it was important," she asserted with confidence.

Familiar with Pat's assumption of the unbroken bond, which was an accepted tenet of life at Holiday Knoll, Rollo smiled, but remarked moodily: "I wish I had a Mona."

"Lend you mine," offered Pat, wondering a little what might underlie that wistful statement of her cousin's. But instantly her restless mind reverted to the question raised by Rollo, a problem ever fertile of speculation to those who find their own special relationship to the world eternally and fascinatingly interesting. "If Mona got it over to me that I had only a couple of weeks left——"

"Make it six months," amended the other with apparent carelessness.

"Too long. I'd have time to be sorry for everything I'd done and that would take all the punch out of the doing it. Call it three days—just for the thrill. Then I know what I'd do, all right."

"What?"

"Step out and step high." A small flame in Pat's shadowy eyes began to dance the devil-dance.

"Who with?" queried Rollo with better comprehension than grammar.

"Oh, a certain party." This was tribal formula of Pat's set, supposed, by virtue of a special and esoteric emphasis, to denote a withering contempt for the phrase thus parodied.

Rollo's dark lashes flickered above a sidelong glance. "I don't quite see that sincere drinker and fusser, my-

self, as a shipmate for a trip beyond the three-mile limit."

"How did you know I meant Warren Graves?" grinned Pat. "That's the only way I could see him at all. If one wanted to try that kind of voyage——"

"But *would* you want to?"

"If I had only three days left? Probably."

"Why?" pressed the other eagerly.

Pat hunched her boyish shoulders in the old, *petite gamine* shrug which was part of her indestructible, unappeased youth. "Oh, to help me forget what was coming. And, then, last call for—for experience, variety, excitement."

"But—Cary?"

"The whole show would blow up before he had time to find it out, wouldn't it? And what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. Maybe he'd think up a sky-limit flutter of his own. But if he did," she corrected herself, jealously and confidently, "he'd want me for shipmate. And of course," she added, "I'd come back to him at the very last, anyway, for after all, Cary *is* Cary. I guess we'd better make it two weeks," she decided finally, her mouth quivering. "If it was only three days I'd probably weaken and want 'em all with Cary; every minute!"

"Then you'd better stick to him," pronounced Rollo.

"Who says I'm not sticking to him?" retorted Pat indignantly. "I can *think*, can't I? Who started me on this whirl, anyway?"

"I don't believe I understand that experience-and-change lech of yours. . . ."

"It isn't a lech. Loathsome word!" objected Pat.

" . . . because I always thought when a girl was married—happily married, I mean—that all that sort of thing—well, I supposed that was all over and done with," murmured the girl naïvely.

"Oh, you did!" Pat grinned. "Nothing's over and done with until a woman's eighty or ninety and maybe not then if you can believe 'Black Oxen' and Gert Atherton. You see," pursued the expositor who had now got the tentacles of her mind firmly wrapped about the promising subject, "a man has a bunch of experience and variety before he's married. He's got —well, a basis of comparison. He knows what it's all about, this yearn business. A woman may or may not know, even after she's married. If the end of the world were scheduled for three days or three weeks or six months and all the women knew it, I'll bet no young and attractive man would be safe alone on the street. Have I paralyzed your virgin soul with horror?" laughed Pat.

"No. But you've made me think."

"Don't overdo it. I was just blah-ing to hear myself blah." Pat studied the downcast face before her with shrewd eyes; then laughed again, but with a change of tone. "What's it all about?" she demanded. "Where do you get this line of Superior Thought?"

"Nothing," returned Rollo, which seemed to be only half responsive and less than that satisfactory.

Pat began to reckon things up. "You've been here five weeks, and I will say that you've given Dorrisdale a shot-in-the-arm that's fairly put it on stilts. You're the circuit clout of the social season all right. Oh, yes! You've carried on for the Fentriss girls,

even if you are only quarter Fentriss. Then last week, with four hundred and seventeen dates and twice that many threats, you walk out on the bunch and disappear for a 'business trip.' Liss'n, boidie. What's on the police card against you? Tell Mommer. Have you been out on the sawdust trail of Experience? *Rollo!* You aren't even listening to me."

"What? No. Yes," muttered the girl. "Getting experience?" Then, in a spurting flame of speech, "*Haven't* I!"

"Well—!" For the moment Pat gasped, wordless. "Who's the man?"

"Bobs."

"What!" yelled Pat. "You're trying to tell me that our Bobs——"

"Oh, no; no! Don't be an ass. I was thinking of him because he went with me on my—my business trip. That's all."

Pat's eyes changed from the astounded to the serious. "You haven't lost your money, have you?"

"No." The tone was indifferent.

"Nor your virtue or your reputation or any other little thing?" In her relief Pat had turned flippant.

"I haven't lost anything."

"I'll bet it's a man, though," Pat mused aloud. In their five weeks together the girls had attained to a degree of intimacy and mutual confidence which each was clever enough to preserve by respect for its implicit limitations. But this curious outbreak on the part of Rollo, the more reticent of the two, had expanded the limits. "It isn't the lovely young minister man, is it? They say he's awfully poor and clever and

good form and Christlike and all that," catalogued Pat, equally innocent of irreverence and irrelevance. "You went out and surrounded a lot of landscape with him the other day, so the watchful motor gossips tell it, and you certainly came back looking as if you'd been to the wars."

"Dorr Manning? There was a month in Paris year before last when I almost thought I could work up a temperature over him."

"Oh, but after all, a parson!" protested Pat. "They're all right in the church, of course," she allowed generously. "But outside of that I think they're *too* sobbing."

"He isn't a parson."

"No? Well, he's a near-one, isn't he? Some sort of uplifter, and they always cramp my style. Of course he's as beautiful as a Greek god, which helps some. But, anyway, he's Careth Lindsay's now. She found him in the bulrushes, so *she* told Pharaoh. So if you've fallen for his chaste charms——"

"I haven't. I only wish I had." Her face clouded heavily with drift of thought. "He's—oh, what does it matter? We've stopped speaking the same language, I suppose."

"No wonder, since you've taken to the Dorrisdale lingo as if you'd had your tongue slit for it. *I* should say we'd done a darn good job of thoroughly corrupting you. I'd like to know, though, how much of it is bluff, just surface stuff, while underneath you go your own calm way and don't believe in us and our ways a dam' bit. Oh, you needn't waste that Egyptian grin of yours on me! I'm not Roy Bretton,

though I don't believe I really guess you out any better than he does. But if the sainted Manning isn't the blue-ribbon pup, why do you wish he was? And who is?"

"Nobody. If there was someone it would help quite a lot just now."

"Take your pick," invited Pat. "Most of the gladsome males of the place are sitting up and begging as you pass by. Don't any of 'em give you a touch of that thrilly feeling?"

"No."

"You *must* be a dead one."

"Do you think so?" She pondered this expert opinion. "I don't," she decided. "No; I've got possibilities, all right. Only—Pat, do you know I've never been kissed? That is—well, kissed."

"Only white kisses, you mean," translated Pat, readily catching the qualification. "That'll soon be remedied if you check around with Roy Bretton."

"Oh, he's tried," was the indifferent reply, "like the rest of 'em."

"Perhaps you haven't done your share of the trying. There's a lot in this reciprocity theory if you're on the trail of the shy and elusive thrill. But I didn't think you were in for that game, Rollo."

"I'm not, particularly. I—well, I can't. It isn't that I'm too proper or afraid, or—I don't know what it is."

"I do," Pat came back promptly. She fathomed, though it was not her own temperament, that physical reticence which is a trait of so many women erroneously supposed to be "cold." She sobered into earnest-

ness. "Keep the hands-off flag flying, Rollo. Most girls have to play the easy necker game nowadays because the men don't take any interest unless the stakes are high. But you can stand off and still get away with it, even in this crowd of Class A fussers, because you're so darn pretty, and you've got the come-hither drag right down to your fingertips."

"There are times when I'd rather have the go-hence. Are they all fussers here?"

"Why put me in the witness box? You ought to know."

"It seems to be the high-sign of Dorrisdale hospitality. Your little pal Warren Graves isn't so far behind the procession that he gets choked with the dust," she added maliciously.

There was a gleam in Pat's eye, but she only remarked, with perhaps a slight overeffect of carelessness: "Has he been trying his artful wiles on the beautiful stranger? Well, that won't spoil my social season. Who else is on your list?"

"Practically everyone I've sat out with, with one refreshing exception, Maxwell Slater."

"What ho! A sail in the offing. Which brings us, my young friends and pupils, to problem number two: why, with all the suitors in the vicinity pawing the air and begging for dog-biscuit, did you go and pick on two such different men as Roy Bretton and Max Slater for your special trailers?"

"Because when I was here before and was being dragged around like a helpless rag doll—oh, I know I looked and acted like one!—they were the only two men who had the human kindness to pretend that I was

alive; the others couldn't even discern me with the naked eye. Of course, Roy was just amusing himself, when he happened to trip over my feet once or twice; he'd flirt with a scarab if it wore skirts. But at least he did realize that I was a living, flesh-and-blood person and not a dummy, glued to the wall. I've confirmed his impression since," she added demurely.

"I'll broadcast Marconi that you have!" averred Pat with conviction. "What about Max? Don't tell me he flirted with you."

"He found me crying at a party and pretended not to notice it, and got me some supper and sat and talked to me about colloids."

"Colloids?" repeated the puzzled Pat. "Did he think you had 'em?"

"You don't *have* 'em. They're Max's special chemical pets. For weeks I read everything I could find on 'em, so that I could talk intelligently to him next time."

"And was there any next time?"

"Not that trip. The next was the Beaumonts' party last month and he never peeped about colloids," chuckled Rollo.

"Can you blame him?" Pat echoed the chuckle. "You've changed—slightly."

"I was certainly a complete flop in those happy girlhood days."

Pat made a guess based on her keen apprehension of feminine motives. "I'll bet that was why you came back here; to show yourself, just to prove up on the

test of your new self, that you could make Dorrisdale eat out of your hand. Wasn't it?"

"Yes. Partly, anyway."

"That took guts, *I'll* inform the class in anatomy," proclaimed the admiring if not over-elegant Pat: "But, partly? What's the other part? Not that you wanted to see Max Slater again?"

"Not so much as I wanted to see Roy Bretton. He was my hang-over, if I had any."

"You're a queer kid. Now that you're here, which is it?"

"Roy's more exciting and more of an adventure. As a prospect for the three last days of the world I might take him on, but not as permanent breakfast food. He gives himself away. Too much the hot and panting hunter."

"There's a tag to pin on an aspiring lover!" opined Pat admiringly. "It would be too relieving to see you pass up the fascinating Roy, who is really our champion skirter—if you let him make the awards—for Max, the quiet boy. Though if it came to infighting," added Pat, whose vocabulary was commandeered from every known department of the world's activities, "I might risk a flyer on Max. There's a kind of lazy reserve power about him that wouldn't be too safe to rouse. I wonder how much you really like him."

"I'm sorry for him," was the considered reply.

"Sorry! The patient is delirious! Why sorry? He's successful and foot-loose, and he's doing something in the world that's worth while. Why he plays around with our bunch, Lord only knows. To rest

his brain, maybe. None of the girls have ever so much as made a dent in him, though Sally Dangerfield and Emmy Adair have tried everything but the ax. You needn't shed any brinies for him, Rol."

"He gives me a feeling of tragedy somewhere in the background. What about his marriage?"

"You don't mean to tell me that he talked to you about that," said the other, incredulous. "You *have* been getting on."

"No; only an offhand mention. By way of honorable warning, I expect. Perfectly fair. Also superfluous."

"His wife's the world's absentest little absentee. He's supposed to have married an Italian countess when he was quite a kid; but why or when the thing crashed or what became of her, nobody knows and I don't believe Max cares. He doesn't seem to care much about anything, for that matter, except his smelly chemicals, and our Bobs. They're quite pals. Play golf together and curse each other violently all around the course. Five dollars a hole and their game is perfectly revolting!"

"Don't I know it? I played around with them last week."

"What! You broke into the sacred game? This is becoming serious. Who was your fourth? Dorr Manning?"

"No. It was a threesome."

"I thought it might be the uplifter because I understand that he and Max are pally. That's a genial combination, I guess! But you'll be the front page headline of the day if you rope and tie old Max.

For that matter, you're the leading subject now of social speculation and talk in our highly conversational village. I wonder how you do it. It's that say-what-you-like-and-be-damned-only-let-me-alone air of yours that sets the tabbies prattling. Well, I gave 'em a daily dozen for the human tongue in my bright and dazzling youth, but as a town topic you've got me advertised right out of the paper."

"I don't like it," said Rollo.

"What! being talked about? Why, it's the paprika on the artichoke! It gives me a thrill almost as good as the naughty kind. Anyway, whether you like it or not, you're getting it from all sides. Did you hear what old lady Martindale called you? Please say 'No' inquiringly, because I'm dying to tell you. She said you were a flame of sex in a too combustible world."

Rollo flushed angrily. "Poison gas! She's a filthy-minded old bleater. Do you think I play the sex game, Pat?"

"We all do," said the downright Pat, never one to be afraid of a word. "What other game is there to play?"

"Oh, in that general sense! But to think of yourself as—as sexy! Clammy idea!"

Pat considered the question dispassionately. "Of course you don't mean to be. None of us do. Oh, a few like Milly Wild and Sally Dangerfield; they haven't got anything else in stock. But you can't help its being there, can you? Any girl who isn't—" she paused and laughed—"a cripple—you know what I mean—has it as part of her without our meaning it or specially thinking of it, unless we're stirred

up to. There are some men that deliberately play to make you think of yourself that way—I hate 'em! And others that make you, anyway, just by being there on the map. I s'pose that's human nature. Ain't nature fierce! But, anyhow, if you're normal, you've got it. And you can just thank Heaven for it, too," she cried, overbearing the other's protest. "What do you think you were born a woman for?"

"Sometimes I wish I hadn't been."

"Rather be the hound than the fox? We-ell; I dunno. The hounds may get more exercise but the fox has more excitement. And *I'll* start a rumor that you do pretty well the way you are. All the men are crazy about you, including my own particular property, Mr. Cary Scott. Good thing I'm not jealous!"

"I adore Cary," answered Rollo with a promptitude and warmth which left the frank quality of her affection as little in doubt as its genuineness.

"He's not too popular with me, though, as of recent date," remarked Pat, beginning to pout a little over recalled grievances.

She loved to play the rôle of tyrannical girl-wife over her much older husband. Sometimes, Rollo judged, she overdid it; Pat was likely to be neither moderate nor subtle where her feelings were involved. Nor was it the safest game in the world to play with a self-contained man of Cary Scott's type, for back of all his tolerant good humor and his quiet but undiminished and passionate love for the child-woman he had married, was an innate force of dignity; you never could be quite certain where the license would

end and the reckoning begin. To Pat, an inveterate experimentalist with life, this constituted a constant temptation to try. Equally fond of both, Rollo was nevertheless and a little anxiously a partisan of Cary's as between the two.

"He countermanded my order for a new sport roadster," complained Pat.

"His business affairs are bothering him, aren't they?"

"That's just his excuse for going away and leaving me for a week and Lord knows how much longer. And we've never been separated for a day up to now. Well," she sighed elaborately, "if he's going to begin to neglect me, he can't put up a moan if I step out a little."

"Don't be a fool, Pat. You can't play the Dirty Dozen kind of game and get away with it with Cary. He isn't that make of husband."

"Who said I was going to?" was the pettish reply. "Everybody else seems to get away with it, though. It's the custom of the place, the local color scheme."

"Because the others don't care for their husbands."

"They did once. 'Lovers once, but married now.'" hummed the iconoclastic Pat. "The fine old ancestral estate of holy matrimony has got 'To Let' and 'Boarders Wanted' signs all over it in these parts. Somebody ought to invent a non-deflatable marriage," she added with her usual recklessly mixed metaphors.

"I don't believe that the women in other places plunge the way they do here."

"The women? Why pick on them specially? They don't plunge *alone*, do they? And I guess we're no

worse than other places where there isn't enough to do to keep people out of mischief. Bobs says we're all sailors' wives."

"Sounds as if it was meant to mean something. Does it?"

Pat set her manicured fingertips together in a highly clerical manner. "I will now ex-plic-i-tate to you in simple but profound terms the modern gospel according to St. Bobs. Every morning the 8.37 train carries away the hardy mariners of Dorrisdale to their far and perilous ports of business, law, finance, engineering, real-estating, or other method of gathering in the smackers. Their wistful-eyed wives sit on the pier-head and wave 'em good-by on their desperate ventures, but *they* don't have any part in it. They stay home and knit—with the k painlessly removed. When their eyes get tired looking wistful they begin to gaze about 'em and pretty soon they say: 'Well, what the hell!' (I'm improving on Bobs as I go along, by the way, Rol; his version hasn't got as much pep in it.) 'What the *hell!*' says they. 'We've got to find something to do to keep the home fires from smoking up the house while Jack's away.' Well, there's bridge which always end in rows, and mah jong which always ends in permanent I.O.U.'s, and golf which is bad for the complexsh, and babies which is worse for the figger (you really ought to hear Bobs on the declining birth-rate and patriotism of our corrupt and contented village; it'd inspire you to go right out and have one—not a village, but a birth-rate—of your own); but the sporty little game that's always there and always different is flirtation, to put it politely,

and it's the most exciting of all, and doesn't cost anything but your reputation—if that! Bobs says our set specializes on it because everything else calls for either brains or effort and we haven't got the one and won't make the other. He's a nice, kindly soul, is our Lord Roberts."

"But the hardy mariners come sailing home every evening to their waiting wives," objected Rollo.

"Not every evening," contraverted Pat, judicially. "And that isn't the point, anyway. I'm afraid the profound symbolism of the subject has gone over the topmost bone in your head without scraping. The idea is that the men are continually on a voyage that the wives don't share. We don't belong on the ship that carries their real interests in life at all. If we try to sneak aboard and stow away we're politely told to go walk the plank and not talk to the man at the wheel. If he wishes to converse he'd rather do it with some other sailor's wife."

"Not Cary," said Rollo.

"Cary means well," allowed Cary's wife generously. "He puts up a better bluff because he's more of a thoroughbred than most of 'em. But he's a man after all and a lot like the others. They jolly us along about how mah-velously companionable we are, and how marriage is going to be a complete partnership of interests besides a permanent coo-fest, and when we fall for it and marry 'em they forget it and we're just nice little house-birds on a perch. Chirp for your bird-seed, sweetie, and don't cock your little head at that door. It's closed and if you try a flutter outside a horrid, big hawk'll get you."

"Ever tell Cary your sailors' wives theory and that you'd like to be taken aboard for the full voyage?"

"No," laughed the expositor, with her customary clear-eyed freedom from self-deception, "he might take me up and then I'd have to make good on my bluff."

"What made you marry Cary, then?" asked the other bluntly.

"I was crazy about the man, of course," returned Pat, surprised. "Still am, for that matter." She lost herself in thought for a moment. "We girls," she decided, "do a lot of thinking and get awfully excited about *getting* married, and darn little about *being* married. The one's a game, full of excitement, and the other's a job. I wouldn't be surprised but what that's what's the matter with matrimony just as much as Bobs' idea."

"Go ahead," advised Rollo. "Get it out of your system."

Pat took a deep breath, stretching her slim, boyish body luxuriously. "Whoo—ooph! Here I am talking about my favorite topic, my sweet self, again when I started out by wanting to tell you something about yourself. What was it? Oh, yes; what Cary said about you. He and Bobs were discussing all your virtues and brilliancies and thereby boring me to extinction, and Cary said that you reminded him of a full-bent bow, with all its taut beauty and threat of unreleased energy."

"Threat," murmured the subject of this vivid conceit. "That's odd. I wonder just what— But I like it."

"You'd better; it's one of Cary's best. Then Bobs

got taken with a poetry cramp and said that you moved as if you were borne along on clean winds and there was a breath of spring in the air where you passed. Then I bust in and allowed as how it was time they said something cute about little Pat, and all I got out of that was that I was a spoiled brat anyway and I'd better take pattern by my lovely and virtuous cousin; and then Bobs put in a final blurb—one of his absent-minded ones—to the effect that underneath all your outside softness and femininity, you had a man's courage, and God knows you needed it. And when I asked him what that was all about, the courage stuff, he glubbed and whooshed like the good old he-bear he is and said *every* woman needed it these days."

Rollo's wide look had overpassed her companion and was lost in far distances. "Said I had courage, did he?" she muttered. "Well, that's something to hold to."

For a long minute Pat studied the girl, hesitating on the verge of a question, but thought better of it and chose herself a cigarette with some care. When she spoke again it was with elaborate offhandedness. "Warren Graves wants to date me for the Deuces Wild party Saturday night."

At this Rollo came back to earth, but made no comment.

"You can spill a meaner silence than anybody I ever knew," commented Pat discontentedly. "Well, I'm going with him," she barked, "unless Cary gets back to stop me."

"Would Cary stop you?"

"Probably not, if I wanted to go. That's where he keeps me guessing. He told me once, when he was trying his hardest not to be in love with me and I was trying my hardest to make him—and doing a lot better job than he was!—that youth would call to youth in the end, and that was the danger of disparity of age. We-ell," she added thoughtfully, "I don't notice anything very senile about Cary's ideas yet. But I do think he might stick around a little more."

"Perhaps he's afraid of sticking around too much and overdoing it."

"I never really know what he is thinking, 'way deep inside him," complained the other. "Sailors' wives stuff, you see!" With an abrupt change of emphasis she asked: "Why don't you like Warren?"

"I've never said I didn't like him," evaded the girl.

"You might as well have. He's quick on the mental trigger, that youth. That's why he never bores me. And he got it on the wing, at the Beaumont party, that you failed to be impressed by his manifold and manifest charm and beauty of character, as he modestly put it."

"Haven't you two got anything better to talk about than me? If not, I don't think the three-mile limit is in sight."

"Forget that three-mile-limit stuff," besought Pat. "I was only talking to get it out of my mind and into words."

At this naïve betrayal Rollo gave the speaker a startled and uneasy look of which she was quite unconscious, and said:

"I'll carry on with your sailors' wives idea. Warren Graves is one of the sharks that hang around waiting for them to get out of their depth."

"That's a cozy little thought. But Warren isn't any sharkier than the rest, and—to put frills on your pretty notion—I guess he doesn't bite any legs that aren't waved in his direction. Come on; be fair to him. He was my original girlhood thrill, you know, and I've got a sort of permanent bet on him as a winner. But just for good old times," she pursued, "I'd be almost willing—almost, says I, for I've got to have something up my sleeve when Cary goes a-sailing—to be noble and unselfish about Warren and surrender him, with a deep, hopeless sob of self-sacrifice, to some pure and lofty-minded girl who would marry him and make an honest man out of the darn thing. It would be a good thing for that laddie." A more serious tone had crept into her banter. "It might even be a good thing all around," she added thoughtfully.

"I've got *my* fingers crossed," averred Rollo. "It'd take a higher concentrate of optimism than I've got to make a husband out of that material."

"Higher concentrate," jeered Pat. "Where do you get your line of language? Oh, I suppose that's chemical stuff. The prevailing Slater influence."

But Rollo was not even listening. "Anyway," she muttered, "nothing interests me less than the husband consideration."

Pat gave a momentary speculation to the thought that this, too, might be the "prevailing Slater influence." "Not so good," she thought to herself. Aloud

she said: "Shy-and-shrinking-violet chat, that, is it not?"

"Yes; that's it," assented Rollo indifferently. But Pat had again caught in her eye that look of withdrawal into dark places. It troubled her lightsome soul.

The natural repository for all Pat's troubles had always been Robert Osterhout. To him she took this one.

"What's up with Rollo, Bobs?"

"Nothing."

"You can't put that over on me. I know her too well. She's a changed wumman since you and she dropped off the map together a week ago. Right in the middle of my most sparkling conversation she goes wandering off into empty space, and I'm talking to nothing but the wall-paper; then an hour later she's all on edge and ready for any pleasant form of hellment that comes along. I don't know whether she's got religion or love or the pip. What's it all about, Bobs? Come on; you know you're just *bloating* to let it out. Tell Pat," she wheedled.

"There's nothing to tell," he growled.

But he would have given much to be free to "tell Pat" what was making his heart heavy for Carol Trent.

CHAPTER V

Pat Scott entered her cousin's room at Holiday Knoll two days later in a series of dervish-like whirls.

"Feeling urgy for the orgy?" she queried hopefully. "I am."

"Is that what it's going to be?" asked Rollo.

"Usually is when Deuces Wild pull a party. You're really *much* too young to be going. Especially with Roy Bretton."

"Young yourself! You look about fifteen."

"Dangerous age," laughed Pat. "I was fifteen when I first got myself soundly kissed. Right under that window."

"Twenty-three can be just as dangerous an age as fifteen," observed the other sapiently, "even if we do know more."

"*Because* we do know more, but never know quite as much as we want to know. That is what is called the Eternal Feminine by the sexperts, which is a combination of sex and expert: I glued it together myself. Not so dim; yes?"

"How much of the local cat-chatter about the Wild girls is true?" asked Rollo lazily.

"They're a pair of pettineckers, all right."

"Meaning what, if anything?"

"Another neat combination, meaning just what it says. Petting and necking, bushing, snuggling, plain

and fancy twining, and all the popular four-arm exercises of the season. Everything but—and I wouldn't bet on the but as far as Milly is concerned."

Molly and Milly Wild lived in the country with an old and shocked aunt. Their father, a retired but far from retiring brigadier-general of regulars, had bestowed upon each of them a large but insufficient income out of a sudden oil fortune, and transplanted himself permanently to the Riviera. Their mother was dead. Having been brought up by the aforesaid shocked aunt who knew nothing, there was nothing they did not know, which is more logical than it appears at first sight. As the débutante set was a little young and much too torpid for their tastes, they traveled with the younger married group, being the only unmarried girls admitted to the full fellowship of the Dirty Dozen. They were permanently in debt, constitutionally in love, and never in earnest. As they were tiny, attractive, irresponsible, and given to hunting in pairs, they were collectively known as "Deuces Wild."

Molly was a ruddy little person with an interested gaze, a quiet manner, and an inexplicable charm which never took its victim by storm but crept stilly up and surrounded him. When he awoke to his situation, it was too late; the fly was on the stickum paper. Milly, the elder, who was twenty-five, was of the radiantly thin, angelic type. She had big, moist, sleepy eyes under heavy black brows, small, strong hands, chill to the touch, a skin of ivory and dark-rose, ardent senses and a scheming brain. She intended to marry a widower fifty-odd years old with not less than two million dollars, and be faithful to him for five years if he lived that long;

but, not having yet marked him down, was having her season's flirtation with Tom Lindsay, having, in the previous season, gone quite as far as was safe and further than was prudent with Roy Bretton.

Their theater and motor-supper party was arranged on the basis that the guests would motor to the city in pairs, go to the show together, recover their cars as they could and race back to the Wild farm, three miles short of Dorrisdale, for a prize, those arriving after 12.30 to forfeit, automatically, the first round of drinks. The last party of the sort had resulted in three arrests, one smash-up, and one near-scandal consequent upon the never fully explained failure of one couple to arrive at all. All of this Pat Scott detailed to her cousin, adding that the present party would probably beat out the former by several laps.

"Why don't we make a foursome of our crowd then?" suggested the innocent Rollo.

"That's a scintillating thought," returned the scornful Pat. "You seem to forget that there are rules to this game, and quartettes are against said rules. Why the tremolo, Rol? Are you suffering pangs of fear for me with Warren or yourself with Roy?"

Rollo laughed. If Pat could know how little she cared, how little it mattered what happened to her! This was the beginning of the adventure, the end of which lay hidden in the top drawer of her dresser. It might begin tonight—or another night—or at any unforeseen moment; but whenever or whatever the event, there was nothing left for her to fear. But Pat was another matter; Pat had all her years before her.

"Does Cary like you to go there?"

Cary's wife pouted like a spoiled cherub. "Cary's on the deep, blue sea, metaphorically speaking, and he can stay there as long as he likes."

"Haven't you heard from him?" asked Rollo, troubled.

"Of course, I've heard from him. Every day for a while."

"Well, what could be fairer than that?"

"I said 'For a while.' Then the postman began to pass me up cold."

Such was the aggrieved innocence of Pat's tone that anyone with an ounce of understanding of her would have been suspicious. Possessing more than the ounce, her cousin was. "Well?" she invited.

"Now you're taking Cary's side," complained Pat.

This got her nothing but the prompt accusation, "You're holding out on me. Why did he stop writing?"

"We-ell; he didn't exactly stop short off—just like that," was the grudging admission. "It was different. I got lazy or busy or thinking of my wrongs or something—Rollo, you're perfectly *revolting* when you snort!—and didn't write him for a few days, and served him right for going away and leaving me. Rol, *am* I the kind of pious and pie-faced young frump that a loving hubby ought to go away and leave unprotected and alone for *weeks?*"

"Weeks, nothing! And you're not exactly in the honeymoon period still, you know," grinned the unsympathetic Rollo. "Besides, business——"

"Business be damned!" was the explosive retort. "And what do you know about honeymoon periods? I'll chalk it on a fence that the honeymoon period in Dorrisdale lasts around the calendar and then

some—only you have to listen close to know which bee is doing the buzzing! I ask you, Rol; *is* this burg the kind of place to leave a young and attractive wife lying around loose in?"

"No; and yet again, no—I'd say," pronounced the girl, taking in the significance of the quick, mutinous blood in Pat's cheeks, the sullen, deep-lighted eyes, the tense young body. "But, Pat, old girl, be reasonable——"

"I *won't* be reasonable."

"Don't throw a fit at me; keep it for Cary," laughed the other. "Honestly, Pat, do you expect him to baby-doll you all your life?"

"'Snice, being babydolled," purred Pat. "Why shouldn't he? I've always been babydolled since I was old enough to quit having dolls of my own. And I'm always going to be, until I get old and wrinkly and hijjus."

(High time Cary came home—thought uneasy Rollo). "What about this correspondence business? When did you last write Cary?"

"Oh, a week ago or so—or more—or less," returned Cary's wife with an affectation of airiness.

"And haven't heard since?"

"What a pest you are, Rol! Yes; I've heard since. I wrote him a rotten letter and got a rottener one back. Wasn't that poisonous of him!" complained the injured wife pathetically. "It wasn't even a letter; just a typed postal card. Typed!" she repeated in an unsubdued yelp of resentment.

"Nothing since then?"

"A telegram. The kind that could be read from the

town hall steps without stirring a hair of anybody's head."

"That's queer," mused Rollo. "That doesn't seem like Cary."

"Doesn't it! I've never been able to figure out yet what does seem like Cary. Just as I think I've got him spotted, numbered, and in the proper file, he goes and does something else again. That's what makes it so darn interesting living in the same cage with the animal —if he'd only stick around!" She gave her lithe shoulders the old *petite gamine* wriggle and shrug. "Oh, *very* well! I don't care. This puts me in line for the party, all right."

Rollo, sprawled at laxest ease on the couch, caught a signal of danger in the moody tone.

"I'd just as soon you weren't going with Warren, though," she averred.

"Oh, I'll behave like a perfect lady. I'll have to, as I'm going to drive and I intend to snare me the prize. It was a silver cocktail set last year. You look out for your own fences. Any insurance expert would say that you and Roy were the poor risk."

No answer came from the divan. Pat, who had been studying in the glass some impressionistic experiments with a new kind of rouge, turned, and frowned perplexedly at the sudden rigidity of the face and figure of Rollo who had straightened up to a sitting posture.

"Are you sick?" she asked.

"No. It's nothing," half whispered the girl. "Are the—did the light go queer for a minute?"

"No. But you look as if *you* had. Lie back. I'll get some salts." In an instant she was back with a phial

and a tiny, jeweled flask. "A sniff and a snifter," she prescribed. "That better? I'll plaster a wet hanky on your lofty brow and you'll be all right." She fumbled in the top drawer of the dresser, and jumped back with a little cry of surprise.

"What's the matter?" inquired Rollo languidly.

"Nothing. Don't talk yet." She cleverly accomplished her ministrations. "You've been hitting up too hard a pace, Rol. I'm going to phone Roy that you can't go tonight."

Rollo sat up with a jerk. "Try to stop me," she laughed. "I'm not only going but I'm going to keep going, and going so fast that you'll have to borrow a third eye to see me at all."

"Oh, that's the way you feel about it, is it?" returned Pat, cocking a conjectural head.

"I'll inform the cosmos that that's pree-sousely the way I feel about it all *over* me."

"Must be in the air," murmured Pat. "I'm rather that way myself. Looks as if the Holiday Knoll delegation were going to get everything out of the party that anyone puts in it. Sure you're all right again?"

"Sure. What brought the yip of alarm out of you just now when you were hunting the hanky?"

"This." Pat gingerly lifted a small, silver-mounted pistol from the drawer.

"Oh, that toy-thing," commented Rollo casually. "I always travel with one."

"But it's loaded."

"They're more useful that way than any other way. Like your flask."

"Don't see what you want it here for," grumbled the

hostess. "I hate the nasty little gadgets. They're always pretending not to be loaded when they are and shooting a hole through Innocent Bystander. What's the idea, Rol?"

"I didn't mean to tell you," returned the girl improvising rapidly, "but two or three times in the night, I've heard queer noises."

"Noises? What kind of noises? Where?" Pat's eyes were big.

"Oh, in there." Rollo nodded toward the big, luxurious, unchanged front room, Mona's room. She added, "And outside on the drive, and once quite plainly on the balcony outside the room there." She thought to herself that she might as well do it handsomely as long as she was doing it at all, but her companion's gasping comment on this made her regret that she had done it at all.

"That's Mona—come back. I wonder what for."

"Pat, darling! You don't believe *that*."

"Well, maybe I don't exactly believe it, but I almost do," replied Pat with the wistfulness of a fairy-hopeful child. "I don't know why people who love a place as Mother loved this shouldn't come back to it sometimes. Don't you go popping away at her with that silly thing if she does. Not that it could do anything to her but it might hurt her feelings. No, it wouldn't, though. She'd be awfully amused."

"I'll put it back in my trunk," promised Rollo. "Beat it now, kid. I've got to drape my fair figure for the festal fray."

Left to herself she carried the weapon to her dressing room and dropped it into the lock-drawer of her tall

trunk, depositing the key in a box on the dresser. Then, after a period of dark thought she went to the bed, lay down, closed her eyes, got up with her eyes still closed, paced her way to the dresser, counting the steps, turned, reached the wall, and guided herself along that until she attained the dressing room and finally the trunk. Yes; she could find it safely; after a few rehearsals, anyway.

She now directed her attention to the important matter of dressing, particularly important this evening, because it was to be the first definitive step in her great and defiant adventure. How definitive she did not know nor care to reckon; let that take care of itself. But—not go tonight? She laughed hardily. What could stop her? What could check her in any course, now? She could hurt no one but herself, and she herself was exempt from penalties or rewards, eventualities or results, all but the one sure one. "I won't die," she promised herself, "without finding out what *la grande passion* evolves itself into," recalling in amused denial the embittered prophecy of a disappointed French wooer who had so far lost control of his manners as to inveigh openly against her "*cœur de glace.*"

Up to now she had held in reserve some pale, unacknowledged hope of cure, despite the sad certainty of the great oculist, but the sudden dimming of vision which had come over her on the divan was at once confirmation, warning, and reminder to make the most of her remaining time. Since this thing was ordained for her without justice or meaning, life itself as a logical system had ceased to have meaning for her. She felt tingling through her veins, like an intoxication, a revulsion of feeling against all rules and laws; if in one way, then in

every other let life have its will of her, like a lover! In her new, reckless emancipation she knew what of terror and ecstasy the nymph must have felt when, flying through the woodland from the satyr's hot pursuit, she turned to the final victorious clutch, mirth-mad with the fullness of a moment that had no past and no future. . . . What had Dorr Manning said? That no man or woman could declare an independence of life. But Dorr was a Christian, bound in the fetters of his professed belief. She would be a pagan. Paganism had always been, perhaps, the unconfessed cult of a profound despair.

When Roy Bretton saw her coming down the stairs to him, he forgot even to rise, but sat like a creature fairy-struck, and whispered, "Oh, you beautiful thing!" with such a hush in his usually confident voice, that Rollo refrained from twitting him on the banality of his speech.

It was close on to one o'clock when Bretton's great, mile-eating roadster brought them to the brilliantly illuminated country house. A general roar greeted his assertion that they had lost their way beyond Englewood, and he was unanimously voted the booby prize of a bottle of lemon soda for the poorest lie of the evening, since there was not a road or path within a fifty-mile radius that his experienced car did not know of its own knowledge. Rollo, flushed to a super-vividness, hoped that she did not look as disheveled as she felt. She had had a lively two hours of it, for her escort's love-making was of the cavalry order; "the way to win 'em is on the charge," was his proven code.

The outcome had somewhat discomfited, though by

no means discouraged, his ardency. Here was a girl who not only baffled, but also puzzled him. By all the evidence of her own attitude she was "out for a time" and not unappreciative of his own obvious attractions. There had been no drawing back on her part from the advances which were the understood gambits of the opening, beginning at the theater; nor had she protested when, on a side road to which he had turned, he stopped the car "for a little earnest conversation" as he playfully put it. Apparently it was going to be "easy"; too easy for his sportsman's temperament, he thought, and gave a moment's consideration to the possibility of an entrapment. But the warm nearness of the girl overbore that. He had drawn her close with the gentle firmness of the accomplished "parker" and had felt, he was sure, her lips turn tremulous under the eager pressure of his, when she drew back, and thus addressed him in the earnest, hortatory heart-to-heart appeal of the uplift orator:

"Be yourself, my boy!! Be your bettah self."

The car ran three miles without taking a breath. Never before in its long and pampered existence had it been "stepped on" with quite that abruptness. That one touch of the current slang of the moment had broken the back of the Bretton campaign more effectually than any force of tears, protests, appeal, or wrath could have done. As a bulwark of morals, ridicule has got propriety reduced to the status of a mud fort!

After a time of silence, infringed upon only by a bit of self-communion on the part of Mr. Bretton predicating a totally befogged condition of his startled soul, Rollo murmured composedly:

"I've heard that called the maiden's defense to the knight's advance. Ever play chess, Mr. Bretton?"

"Me? I couldn't even play mumbletypeg with a set of false teeth," declared the stricken swain. "And for heaven's sake don't make me feel any worse by calling me Mister."

"But I'm only a callow girl, you know. I'm afraid of you."

"Oh, Gawd!" he groaned. "Will you let a feller off for a dinner for a dozen at the club, and you name the dozen?"

"Oh, I don't need to be bribed," she laughed, enjoying his discomfiture thoroughly and liking him the better for it.

"Well, I'll never lay finger on you again."

"And I didn't ask you to promise that, either."

He slowed down the car, under a light this time, to get a good look at her. "You have got me completely dipped," he confessed.

But afterward, when he came to review the whole evening, he wondered whether she hadn't been playing a deep, feminine game of withholding, the better to draw him on. Roy Bretton's vanity was a hardy, male plant.

On her part, Rollo had come through with a quickened pulse of adventurousness. Attracted by Roy's physical magnetism, she was, by an inexplicable compensative reaction, rather repelled by its manifestation, savant though he was in the technique of love-making. He interested the woman in her by keeping it constantly aroused to awareness of itself, to speculation as to how far it would eventually respond to his exigency. But she was sensibly relieved when the goal of the farm was

reached. Having had enough of twosing for the time, she at once sought the spot where the crowd was thickest. This was in the circle about the piano where Milly Wild, with the face of an undernurtured cherub and the voice of a boy angel, was singing a French song which would have made the bristles stand up on a pig's eyebrows, supposing the animal to have had the advantages of a liberal education.

Across the room stood a bottomless punch bowl, and into the human arc of which it was the center, single males were constantly breaking, returning to invisible partners bearing double drinks. Warren Graves passed Rollo on this errand, and the girl wondered vaguely in what far nook Pat was awaiting him. After all, though, what business was it of hers? Pat could take care of herself; if she couldn't, so much the worse for Cary. The irresponsibility of the time and place was engulfing all of Rollo's thoughts. For the moment, she craved the press and clamor and changeful companionship of the crowd; later she might yield to the current which was whirling away frail bark after frail bark into hidden and perhaps dangerous eddies.

Max Slater ambled over to her. He was a big, fair, heavy-shouldered athlete, with the firm mouth of the man who has learned self-control—at a price—and eyes that were faintly amused and faintly tired of being amused. There was little about him to suggest the intent scientist.

"You make an effective entrance," was his greeting.

"Just when the entertainment is at its highest, and, I should say"—she glanced, smiling, toward the singer —"its thickest."

"Do you understand that stuff?"

"Perfectly. Her French is snappy."

"What do you think of it?"

She raised her brows. "It's all right, if one likes that sort of thing."

"But you don't like it," he persisted, "do you?"

"Why, I can see some thrill in playing with fire," she answered. "But playing with dirt only gets your mind smelly."

"Ah-h-h-h!" He elongated his recognition of the aptness of the phrase. "I'll bet your mind smells like—like—" The smile of a politely weary acknowledgment of the expected floral banality on her lips, warmed into pleasure as he found what he was seeking—"like wind off a lake at the first warmth of dawn."

"For that you may get me a drink, and take me away from this bunch."

They found an unoccupied nook in the hallway.

"Who won the prize?" she asked.

"Lloyd Parmenter and Emmy Adair. Your festive young cousin and Warren Graves came in second. A tire fizzed on 'em. You weren't here for the announcement."

"No. We got lost. At least, so I'm given to understand."

"Yes? Pleasant ride?" Her tone had invited further question.

"Well—interesting. Quite sufficiently so."

Without any change of tone or expression on his part, she realized that he was angry, and liked the sensation of making him so; anyway, of the power to make him so. "What do you expect if you go out with Bretton?"

"You don't like Roy?"

"Let him keep to his married—" The final word was swallowed into a sub-vocal growl, which, she guessed, was just as well.

"Is he supposed to be any worse than the rest?"

"You've had opportunities of comparison."

"Not with you," she retorted flippantly, being annoyed at this.

"Cheap stuff, Rollo," he observed.

"Right!" she agreed cheerfully. She whistled chirpily as if to a straying dog. "Come back to Mother, little wise-crack; your act is a total frost."

In spite of himself he smiled; but his voice was still grim as he asked: "Why do you want to cheapen yourself to me? Is it because it's too much trouble to live up to what I think of you?"

She hoped that the inner gasp which she felt hadn't got into her words as she said, in a totally changed accent: "I didn't know it was 'up,' Max."

"Then you're a fool," was the harsh retort. "Play your little parlor games with Roy and Tom Lindsay and Wally Dangerfield and Cary Scott——"

"I won't have you say that of Cary," she blazed out. "He's as clean and straight a man as I've ever known, and he adores Pat."

"Why doesn't he look after her better then?" he muttered.

"We're not discussing my cousin," with an emphasis on the last words.

"Correct. We were discussing your cunning little ways—not that they are any different from those of the

others—and I notice that you deny nothing but Scott, wherefrom I infer——"

"I think I'm going to be angry with you in a minute," she warned.

"Not as angry as I'd be with you if I believed what I'm pretending," he answered unexpectedly, and then took her breath away by adding slowly: "I'd like to know why you're playing a part tonight, and what the show is. Somehow I seem to get a whiff of tragedy."

"It's because you're a solemn old ghoul, yourself, then," she got sufficient command of herself to say lightly. "As for the necking exercises—Pat Scott would dovetail that and call it nexercises, I expect—thus far I've been a good deal more necked against than necking. Just when I ought to be getting thrilled I get bored."

"Did Bretton's style of action bore you?"

"No. Kept me too busy," she laughed. "The Dorrisdale pace is certainly keen and Roy doesn't lag behind any. Max, did you ever hear an old English boxing phrase about a man's learning to make his hands keep his head?"

"Yes."

"Well, in this affectionate little suburb, a girl has to learn to— *You* say it, Max."

He pondered for a moment. "To make her head keep her body," he concluded. "Is that it?"

"Something like that. It's not always too pleasant to have that feeling. Lives of the hunted."

"I judge that as an amateur boxer you're Class A."

"I'm not sure I like the way you said that."

"Don't you? It was meant well."

"Then I do like it," she decided. She peered out of their tiny fastness. "D'you know, I believe this party is getting rough."

Through the wide doorway she could see three or four pairs whirling in a wild and improvised dervish dance. A capacious chair, opposite, was occupied by a couple who, though directly beneath a light by no means dim, were completely enwrapped in each others' arms and as completely lost to the world, for the moment. Another pair, half entwined, passed by not very steadily, stopped on the stair landing, whispered for a moment, made a swift reconnaissance, and disappeared swiftly upward. Several revelers were festooned around convenient doorposts and other props. Mike Adair, very drunk, was standing by the piano singing in his throaty, emotional baritone an old English love song and singing it quite beautifully, with pauses between stanzas to kiss with increasing ardency the laughing mouth of his accompanist, Cissie Standish. From the reactions of the listeners scattered in dim corners one might guess that the music was acting at once as a solvent of inhibitions and a stimulant of emotions. A muffled, laughing voice from the glassed-in porch besought:

"Mike, if you don't stop singing in that *sobbing* voice, I'm a ruined woman."

In the interval between two verses, someone switched the lights off. The great god, Pan, was ramping through the darkness. Rollo heard a savage and melancholy voice—Roy's voice she knew it to be—demand hoarsely in the murk: "What's become of that damn girl?" and didn't have to be told what "damn girl" was meant.

She crept closer to Max Slater's shoulder and he felt her shiver slightly.

"Well?" he asked.

"Take me home," she whispered.

In the car she said: "Enough is enough, at least, to start on." Then, with changed tone: "I don't think so well of you as a consecutive conversationalist. You've never so much as mentioned colloids to me, and you were all het up about 'em when I was here before."

"Colloids?" he repeated, puzzled for the moment by the connection. He got it and laughed. "Ah, but I haven't made myself believe yet that you're the same girl."

"Right; I'm not. Still I must be partly the same, or I wouldn't be quitting this party. Max, it's a blight to be so respectable inside. But what has happened to the cutie little colloids?"

"Oh, I'm off them for the time being, and on something more interesting."

"It could easily be that," she murmured wickedly. "What is it?"

"Some radio-activity ideas I'm trying to work out. There's enough risk in it to give spice to the thing."

Rollo, who had begun to feel that comfortable restfulness in which one talks almost mechanically, came wide awake for some reason which did not clarify itself in her mind. "D'you mean it's dangerous?"

"Some of the stunts are a little tricky. There's so much about it that isn't understood. And somebody's got to find out. Not that I'm the guy; I don't flatter myself that far. But I may get a little something done before——"

"Before what?" she pressed as he paused.

"Before somebody else cuts in ahead of me," he said carelessly.

"That isn't what you started to say."

"I started to tell you that I came so near not going to the party tonight that it gives me a chill to think of it and of what I might have missed."

"That's pretty of you, Max. I'd have missed you, too. . . . Are we home already?"

"I hate to admit it, but we are," he replied as the car curved through the bare-shrubbed driveway of Holiday Knoll.

"Don't get out, please. I've got my key. Good-night, Max. And—thank you."

"For what? Bringing you home?"

"No. Something else. I don't know exactly. Yes; I do, though. But—well, just thank you. Don't you want to be thanked—appropriately, Max?" She gave a soft little laugh, her face upturned to his.

He looked at her somberly for a moment. "Yes," he answered.

She cupped her hands, wide, to her face. "Not that way, though," he said. "I'm not Roy Bretton. You don't need that defense with me."

"I ought to have known," she replied, and dropped her hands.

His kiss was quick and very gentle. She was at the door when she said: "I'm getting awfully fond of you, Max. I think I always have been. But it's a queer sort of fondness."

"I'll take it, whatever it is. And I'll never ask anything of it," he promised, still somber.

"And that's a queer kind of answer." She waved to him and vanished.

Sleep would not come to her after she had crept luxuriously into bed, though she had deemed herself tired out. Thoughts of Pat intruded; worrisome thoughts. She should not have left her cousin there with Warren Graves; Pat was so young, so mercurial, so irresponsible, in spite of her two years' marriage. She would play with fire for the mere excitation of it, and if she did get burnt she would be so pitiful, so childishly self-excusatory, so helpless. Cary, she thought, was too much the fatalist for a young thing like Pat; with his determined attitude of standing aside and letting her take her own way, too proud not to trust her. But his anger, if she should betray that trust, would be measured by his pride; there would be no harshness, not even any recriminations, but there would be no forgiveness.

"Why does she have to be such a little fool!" thought the girl impatiently. "She's got everything to lose. If it were me, with nothing to lose, it wouldn't matter."

After a time she got up, slipped on her chaussettes, and went into Mona's room, as if there might be counsel in the atmosphere of the place. The long window, overlooking a corner of the drive, tempted her with its gleam of misty moonlight. Going to the closet she wriggled into a long fur wrap which had been the dead mother's —Mona wouldn't mind, she thought, remembering the beautiful woman's sympathetic tolerance of her drab young girlhood—and crept out upon the balcony, sniffing the unseasonably warm and soft night air. She

leaned, dreaming and breathing deep, against the railing, a tall and white figure in the soft radiation.

Presently she became aware of a car standing in the shadow below her. How long it had been there she could not guess. Two people were talking, low and hurried, from beyond it. Pat's voice, its rich, hoarse timbre unintelligible, in broken murmurs. Something told Rollo not to turn, not to speak, not to move; but she sent her thoughts, her warnings, straining down to the young wife beneath.

There was an exclamation in Pat's voice, a startled protest in that of Warren Graves. A door slammed below; sharp, decisive, divisive; not the still cloture after lovers who creep into sheltering darkness. . . . Pat's quick feet on the stairs.

Rollo glided into bed and slept.

CHAPTER VI

THREE o'clock saw the Wild party beginning to fade. The more cautious thought, with justification, that it was time to be on their way. The more reckless had scattered into far havens of the many-chambered house, pair by pair. The festal element had passed the stage of song and were clustered in bee-close groups, clinging affectionately about the bottomless honey-pots. Molly Wild, whose head was of iron, had organized a crap game in the side hall and was eighty dollars to the good. For Pat Scott the real gayety of the party had passed, filmed over with an alcoholic mist.

"Time to be going," she pronounced, rising from her snug corner and giving herself a feline stretch and writhe.

"The party isn't half over," pointed out Warren Graves.

"If you feel that way you needn't leave," she vouchsafed kindly.

"Let Mary's little lamb do your bleating for you," he retorted. "If there's any go-stuff moving, whither thou goest, I'm the other ghost. Watchman, what of the night? Contains it one more little drink e'er yet we depart?"

"You've had quite enough. And more than three puts a complete dimmer on my style." She was an abstemious drinker in a free-drinking set, not from cau-

tion or natural restraint, but because she was shrewd enough about herself to realize at what point she began to wane. Pat's keenest stimulus was that of nerve centers more specialized to her sex than those which respond to a merely alcoholic excitation. Tonight she was, as she would have worded it, at the top; though her companion of the entire evening—for they had hardly been separated since the party began—did not realize this: he thought her even more capricious than usual and disappointingly standoffish, considering that she had quite made a point of consenting to come with him alone. There had been moments in their long, uneven talk, when he could feel her response to the old, early attraction between them; then again, she had told him peevishly that she "hated being pawed," and he had instantly drawn back and apologized with that smiling acceptance of her every whim which was one of his chiefest charms. "Where's Rollo?" she continued.

"Gone home, I believe."

"With Roy Bretton?"

"No. Max Slater. They eased out an hour ago."

"That's safe enough."

The habitually blithe Warren turned momentarily morose. "No man is safe," he gloomed at her, "when he's insanely in love with a girl."

"Hanging storm signals on yourself?" inquired Pat impudently. "No; you needn't go any further with *that;* not right now, anyway. I can't see Max as the sighing and lorn lover."

"No; that isn't his style. But he's got it and got it bad. The first case of a married life. It takes hard, that kind."

"Did yours? And what am I; the twentieth?" she twitted. "Though you're not married, are you!"

"Whose fault is that?"

"As a blighted being you're a bad actor," she laughed. "Come along, if you're going to cling to me. What about good-nights? D'you suppose there's any use trying to find either of the Deuces?"

"Certainly not. It's a felony in this house to disturb the peace after 3 A. M. Let's not flutter the birdies."

"I think I'd better drive," she decided as they went out.

"Go ahead. Though I'm quite piously sober, considering the time, the place and the damper you've put on me tonight."

"Have I?" she murmured. "I expect I have been pretty poisonous in spots. I've been thinking."

"Bad for the bean," he warned.

"Right! I'll stop it. And the evening isn't quite over yet."

"Too nearly." He gently detached her right hand from the wheel, spread the fingers among his own, then bent them back and kissed the palm. "You don't mind my borrowing this just for—for the illusion, do you?" he asked wistfully.

"Wait a minute and you can have both of 'em," she returned. She turned the car into the Knoll entrance and, with the power shut off, it coasted silently along the curved driveway until it stopped in the shadow of the wing, fatefully on the very spot where she had first encountered Graves, years before. "There," breathed Pat, and made good her promise. He would kiss her now, thought Pat, and then— She didn't know nor par-

ticularly care what might happen. Coincidence of place, atmosphere and companionship had swept away the years, and she was again the young, unawakened girl, all a-quiver with eagerness to know what the great adventure of life might be; all responsive to the wooing voice of the young godling who had come upon her lurking there, a mutinous little Cinderella outside the festal ball. And now that his breath was upon her cheek again, his arm across her shoulders, responsibilities, ties, and duties seemed to have dissolved with the dissolving years. She leaned toward him, then away from him in a queer, foreboding dizziness.

"Pat," he said resentfully, "why the devil did I have to fall in love with you?"

"If you were going to," she returned, "why didn't you begin six—seven years ago, right here on this very spot?"

"I did. But I didn't have sense enough to realize it until lately."

"You could have done anything in the world with me then," she dreamed with soft lips. "D'you remember how you pounced on me from behind that bush? And how I wilted when you kissed me? That was my first revelation of what a kiss could mean. Oh, you started something there, Warren."

"Something that has never been finished," he muttered.

"Better unfinished," she mocked. "The thrill unfulfilled! It never quite dies, though, that first-kiss thrill. Not for a girl. And it never, never quite repeats itself."

"What a child you were!" he recalled. "Such a will-

ful, fascinating little spitfire. And how you hated me for joshing you about your kiddiness."

"I could have murdered you. Up to then I'd been considering myself the heroine of your dawning romance, too," she chuckled. "You were all that a matinée hero could be to me, and more, with the gardenia in your coat, and the twinkle in your eye, and the laugh in your voice."

"The twinkle was all over me. I was pretty well spangled that evening."

"Cinderella never suspected. Oh, I fell for you all right, right then and there, *at* once. Flat on friend ear! And when I told you the family would jump me if I tried to dance, you said: 'Snoutrage,' which became a household word after that; we adopted it as a model of verbal economy."

"I'm sure I wasn't a model of anything else that night. Let's see; I scuffled up some punch for you, didn't I?"

"It was *revolting*. I almost choked to death. What a loathsome brat you must have thought me when I spluttered it all over your white shirt-front!"

"Something out of a fairy story—that's what I thought you."

"I was certainly human enough when you kissed me. And then Connie came."

"How I cursed Connie!"

A still, small voice which was certainly not the voice of conscience (conscience seemed to have lapsed into a profound stupor for the time) but which Pat failed to recognize as her own usually assured speech stated a self-evident fact: "Connie isn't here now."

Why had she said it? she asked herself in a sort of

warm panic, the instant it was uttered. It was a game that she had always despised in other women, this adventuring into forbidden territory, like cowardly-daring children who thrust one foot over a boundary line and run, shrieking and thrilling, from the threat of reprisals. Unless one meant to cross the boundary definitely—and no such intention was in Pat's whirling mind. No intent, at all; rather an abeyance of purpose, positive or negative, of will or denial. . . . She was back seven years in the soft mists of time, and the kiss of her girlhood's Prince Charming was again quickening every nerve in her body.

A pulse in her temples began to beat out a measure, "Danger—danger—danger—" It was overborne and swallowed up in the throbbing thunder of her blood. She pressed closer into the arms that drew her.

Thoughts began racing confusedly through her brain, clarifying into one theme: incorrigibly self-excusatory, Pat told herself that her being there in Warren Graves' arms was not her fault; it was Rollo's for leaving her at the party; it was Molly Wild's for deliberately pairing her off with Warren; it was Warren's for coming back to make love to her when she hadn't given him any excuse for it, not any *real* excuse; most of all it was Cary's for leaving her, going away, neglecting her, not writing to her, not realizing that he ought to be there to fortify her against such temptations as this, the kind of temptation that every attractive married woman must face, that the Dorrisdale married set accepted or rejected as a matter of course. Whatever happened was his fault; his, his, his! A furious, smarting, childish resentment against her absent husband welled up and justified her of all this,

blending with the inborn spirit of lawlessness, of adventure in her turbulent, gipsy blood.

This settled, nothing now mattered but the moment. Her throat felt dry and thick and hungry for deep kisses. Her eyes were heavy, heavy, her breath too repressed to keep pace with the racing flood in her veins. With lips for the moment withdrawn, she murmured:

"Do you want me?"

"Oh, my God! Want you!"

"I want you, too. Is that wicked? Or only natural? I wish I knew what it was all about, this wanting. But —we mustn't."

"Mustn't we? Why not?"

"Oh, Warren! Because." She might have been the fifteen-year-old child again, the wondering outcaste of the festivities.

"There isn't any because. Not if we care."

Did she "care"? Was this urgency that tortured all the fibers of her woman's being—was that really "caring"? Or was it something else to which she refused to give a name? She slipped from his arms and from her seat in one lithe movement, and stood by the car, rigid and staring into the darkness, into the past, into the future.

"Not if we really care," repeated his voice close to her ear. "Do you—" A pause, then half-tauntingly, all-tenderly, the name by which he had first petted her—"sweetie?"

"Ah, don't call me that!" she choked. "I've got to—to go in."

From behind his hands slipped beneath her arms, closing across her breast. She tilted her head back-

ward to his long kiss. "Take me with you," he whispered.

Instantly and without any volition on her part she said "Yes." The promise of that decisive and surrendering word went flaming through her blood.

She took a step forward, leading him, came into the patch of moonlight, and stopped dead, dropping his hand.

"Oh!" she gasped.

"What is it, darling?"

"Mona!"

Stupefied, he followed the indication of her upraised, stiffened arm, and saw the woman-figure with the averted face, all white in the paler moon mist that enveloped the balcony.

"It's Mona. It's Mother. For me," whispered Pat, awed and ecstatic.

"It isn't. It's—it's alive," he protested weakly. "Pat, don't——"

His arms were empty. The sharp impact of the closing door cut off his plea. He jumped forward, but the bolt had shot on the inner side before his fumbling hands could find the knob.

When he looked up again the white figure had gone.

Awaking slowly the next morning, Rollo became aware of an alien presence in the room. She identified it as a hollow-eyed and twitchy Pat, seated in the big chair by the window.

"Mona came back last night," was her abrupt announcement, without preliminary of any sort.

Rollo jerked herself upright in bed. "What?"

"She did. I saw her."

"Where?"

"On the balcony. Just where she used to stand when she couldn't sleep, and look out over the garden."

Rollo started to speak, but wisdom interposed in time.

"She was in the long fur wrap she always wore. She didn't say a word or even look at me. She didn't need to. Her being there was enough."

"Enough for what?"

"I was going to let Warren come in with me. I would have if she hadn't been there to stop me. You don't believe that, do you?"

Rollo's eyes were fixed and dreamy and a little awed. "Yes; I believe it," she lied. But was it wholly a lie that she credited Mona's interposition in Pat's crisis?

What influence, if not Mona's, had held her sleepless after her return from the party, impelled her to go out on the balcony in the white-furred likeness of the dead mother, whispered wordlessly in her ear, when she saw the locked pair below, the caution neither to move nor speak? Whose subtle guidance, if not that of the joyous and beautiful and strange woman who had tasted many light loves and had died with the ashes of those fires cold in her avid mouth?

Pat sat, sniffing woefully. Two big tears crept from out the corners of her eyes. With a leap, Rollo crossed over to her, gathered her in protecting arms. "What is it, you poor kid?" she demanded.

"I w-w-w-want my dam' husband back," wailed Pat.

"Tell him so then."

"I'm afraid he wouldn't come. Or he'd write me another rotten postal card. You telegraph him to come."

"What'll I say?"

"Say anything. He'll come if you send. He'll think something awful has happened to me. Oh, not *that*," she added hastily. "Just that I'm dead or something."

"That's a diverting thought. Before I mess up in this I'd like to know one thing. Are you in love with Warren Graves or not?"

"No. I'm not in love with anyone—except Cary."

"Then, why, for the love of Mike——"

"I can't explain to *you*. You wouldn't understand."

"Meaning politely that I'm merely an imbecile."

"Nothing like that! You know heaps more about lots of things than I do. But not about this. You're not *really* a woman, Rol. You only think you are."

"No? Well, spouting fountain of wisdom, what am I?"

"You're only—what's the gadget a caterpillar weaves and crawls into before it comes out a butterfly? A cocoon; that's it. You're only the cocoon that turns into a woman by and by."

"I'd rather be that than a fool moth that flies into every flame."

"It isn't every flame," Pat defended herself. "It's never been anybody else—except for a few little harmless flutters—and Warren's different. I've always had a—a queer feeling about him."

But Rollo was following another line of thought. "Pat, do you really believe that line about a girl's not being a woman until—well, until some man teaches her?"

"Don't you go and get too interested, now," warned the sapient Pat, "and figure on going to school before you get married. I'll tell you how I figure it: a girl

isn't a woman at all before she's married or—or something. Then she's only partly a woman, and after she's had a kid she's the finished product. I've just thought that out and I consider it rather neat. Don't you?"

"If I had time, I'd have a kid," mused Rollo forgetfully.

"Time!" repeated the amazed Pat. "You've got all the time on the clock, haven't you?"

Rollo caught herself up with a jerk, appalled at her near-betrayal. "I've got my own plans and schemes," she announced magniloquently, "and it's going to take time to figure them out."

"I suppose there's a man in 'em somewhere?" suggested Pat.

"Oh, well; he's incidental."

"They've never been incidental in my young life," confessed Pat. "Rol, are you going to drag Cary back to me by the hair? Please do!"

"Oh, yes!" returned the girl impatiently.

"I guess it's lucky for me—*and* for Cary—that you're on the map," murmured the young wife. "As a guardian angel you're It."

A guardian angel! There it was; the interdependence of human lives.

(I have to hand it to Dorr Manning that he was right—thought Rollo.)

CHAPTER VII

"How does it strike you as far as you've gone?" inquired Maxwell Slater. He was seated with his feet on the desk in Dorr Manning's combination office and living room at the Boys' Club, a stubby pipe in his mouth, his bulk slanted back at a restful angle, and was apparently addressing a rubber curtain from beyond which came spluttering, sploshy sounds as of a conscientious hippopotamus at his morning ablutions. "Hey, there!" he added in a yell. "I'm talking to you."

The aquatic sounds ceased. "Talk some more," said a voice. "I *dote* on music."

"You come out of there," growled Max, "and tell me whether Dorrisdale shapes up to the brilliant prospectus I gave you of it."

"Been too busy to find out." Dorr Manning emerged into the room and set to flicking himself dry with a large towel. His friend regarded him with envy.

"Not an ounce of tallow on you, while I"—he prodded his own waistcoat discontentedly—"am soft as a fish's kiss. How do you keep so fit?"

The other set his heels, bowed himself back from the waist, shot into the air, and with the full backward whirl was on his feet again. "A pinwheel a day keeps the wrinkles away," quoth he. "Do that every morning and you'll never grow old."

"Wouldn't have time," grinned his friend. "I'd die

of a broken neck in the prime of my youth and beauty at the first attempt. . . . Come on, boy. What do you think of our little mountain peak of civilization?"

"It's all right, as far as it goes."

"Don't let the mad enthusiasm of youth overcome your natural conservatism," besought Max. "What can we do to make your stay in our midst pleasant and profitable?"

"Personally you might give me a thousand dollars."

"I might," conceded the other. "But, to follow out your little fairy tale, would you kindly, while visualizing me in the act of loosening my chaste garter and digging the sum out of my stocking, tell me what for?"

"To help me build a swimming pool for my kids. They need one."

The visitor sat up. "Oh! You're in earnest, are you?"

"I sure am."

"I might leave it to you in my will. That'd be just as sure and pretty near as quick."

Dorr's sensitive face sobered. "No better news, Max?"

"Don't know how there could be. They're absolutely up in the air about the case and honest enough to say so. When the doctors don't know what to do, the undertaker does. Well, better men than me have got a poisoned arrow in their guts because they were too curious about what was on the other side of the boundary. 'S talk about something else."

" 'S talk about that thousand dollars with a view to making it two," Dorr promptly took him up.

"Tell you what I'll do. I'll give that bunch of pine

knots that calls itself your Board a thousand a year if they'll tack half of it onto your salary."

"You go to hell," returned the other genially.

"For a really religious guy, you've got a sprightly line of conversation. You have got religion, haven't you, boy? The real thing, I mean."

"I hope it's the real thing. It's the best I could work out for myself. But I don't let it break out on me any more than I can help."

"Where'd you get it?"

"The war," answered the other shortly.

Max nodded. His own war experience made it easy for him to understand that taking of refuge as readily as he could understand how many another brave and fine soul had gone recklessly to the devil as a result of the terrible disillusionment. "You never were a Christer in college," he observed.

"I'm not a Christer now," stated the other with emphasis.

"Don't like that tag pinned on you? Can't say I blame you, considering what most of the Christers were in our time."

"That's just the point. Considering what they were, I resent the slur on—on the name of the finest hero in all history."

"One way to look at it," returned his crony, impressed. "You always did get your own slant on things. Booze, for instance," he smiled reminiscently. "Our lot was the best bunch of free-acting drinkers in college, but I never saw you with even the beginnings of a shine."

"Here's where I brag," announced Dorr. "As a short-stop drinker I'm the Only and Original Living.

My own patent system. Never more than four drinks in any one twenty-four hours."

"What's the interesting idea?"

"Oh, I dunno. I just sort of figured it out to get fun out of booze without ever letting booze get the laugh on me."

There was a silence of thought on Max's part while Dorr, having concluded some operations on a set of pulleys, wrapped himself in a bath gown and sat down by his caller.

"Same for women?" that enterprising gentleman shot at him suddenly.

Manning's expression hardened. "That's different. It isn't like drink. That's a case of total abstinence or —or of plumb rottenness, for some men."

Max stared, then whistled. "Of whom you are one?" he surmised. "I'd never have guessed it. You had the rep in college of having kept yourself unspotted from the big, bad world, as the purity leaflets say. I supposed you were and were still keeping it up. What about it? Give me a poke in the slats and tell me to mind my own business and be damned to me, will you?"

"No. I think maybe I'll tell you the sad story of my life, instead."

"Shoot. My breast is bared."

"Well, when I was a raw kid of nineteen I fell for an older woman."

"They all do, the romantic sort," commented Max. "Case of the ennobling and purifying influence of a good woman upon budding manhood, eh? That's why you never went the rounds in college."

"She wasn't a good woman. At least, they'd have

pinned the other label on her if they'd known about us. But she was clever enough to fool 'em all, including her husband."

"Ah, it was *that*," remarked the other with lifted brows.

"All of that. Can you see the situation? A bored, adventurous, and rather brilliant woman of thirty, and a boy who knew nothing of that side of life until she taught him."

"Medieval drama. I expect, though, that page-and-liege-lady combination is commoner in modern life than we suspect."

"Bondage of the flesh," mused Dorr. "That's a phrase to most people. It was a living reality to me, and through the flesh, of the spirit. It goes that way when you're very young. I expect it would work in just the opposite direction with me now, if at all."

"What ended it?"

"One day she told me casually that she was going to have a baby."

"The plot thickens. Yours?"

"No. Her husband's."

"That is a bit thick—though strictly correct."

"Have you ever been really sick of life, Max?"

"I should say not! I'd like to live forever, if it were on the cards."

"Sorry, old boy. I forgot. . . . Well, I didn't have much use for living, for months. I was a romantic, you see. When I came to myself, it was with a kind of nausea against the whole business of sex."

Max grinned, though not unsympathetically. "In other words, you'd been ruined. That's what you'd have

said about yourself if you'd been a girl—and thought it, too."

"Then, maybe. I wouldn't think it now."

"Oh, yes, you would. Not theoretically, maybe. But any girl of your acquaintance who had been through such an experience you'd regard as déclassée. So would I. So would any fellow."

"Do you regard me as déclassée?"

"Don't try to pull that parallel stuff. It simply isn't there."

"But the morality of the matter in both cases——"

"Is the same; granted. If it were a question of morality. It isn't. It's a question of social standards, and they're a few thousand times more binding than morals."

"They ought not to be."

"Granted again. But if any girl that you know had fallen for an older man as you did for your older woman, do you mean to say that you wouldn't hold it against her?"

"Not any more than against myself, if she'd had the same excuse."

"Oh, I expect the excuse is pretty much the same the world over," was the easy and cynical reply. "What became of your particular bad woman?"

"Do you know, Max, I've come to suspect that she wasn't really a bad woman; only a hungry one. I've never seen her since."

"Cured, eh?"

"Of that and of anything like it. I'll never again fall for a purely physical attraction."

"But if you should fall for the other kind with the physical to back it——"

"I'd run away."

"Better get out your running shoes, then," advised his friend with a smile. "This is one of the danger spots of the whole social coast; the sirens *never* stop singing here. There are more trouble-hunting women to the square mile in Dorrisdale, married, half-married, and undermarried, than in any other part of these here more or less United States. And if you're looking for a guide to our fair city, I should say that Careth Lindsay is a whole Cook's Tour in one slender and attractive package."

"I don't think I get you," returned the other coldly.

Max "got" him readily enough. "Don't wax raucous, hombre. I'm not saying anything against Careth except that she knows her way around. She's a lot better than her set. Well, if you can walk with queens and keep your virtue, as Kipling almost said, you'll establish a record, with the so-called Dirty Dozen. Going to the Lindsays' dinner party next week?"

"I don't think so," said Dorr slowly.

"You're making a mistake. If you want to see how we act in Dorrisdale go to the Deuces Wild. If you want to hear what we think about the way we act, go to Careth Lindsay's. Her dinners are as near an approach to the highbrow as the mental strain will permit us to enjoy. She can get a spark out of the deadest brain-coil."

"What's this 'we' and 'our' stuff you're pulling, Max? Are you going to the dinner?"

"Such is my desperate intention."

"I thought you'd retired to the lofty heights of science. Why this descent?"

"A mild, more or less fatherly interest in a young friend of yours. What's wrong with Rollo Trent, Dorr? You know her pretty well."

Dorr smiled. "She asked me the same thing about you."

"You didn't let anything out!"

"Think it likely?"

"No. Well, tell me."

"Think it likely?" repeated the other gibingly. "Even if there were anything to tell."

"That child is living in a fever," reflected Max aloud. "It isn't a fever of the senses; I know those symptoms in the female of the species; and it isn't just the excitement of the pace. I've seen her stare at ghosts. What's she afraid of, Dorr?"

"You're taking a lot of notice of that dangerous young person, old bean," remarked Dorr lightly.

"Platonic, purely. Couldn't well be anything else for a man with my prospects. Though I won't say, if— By the way, Flash," he broke in upon himself brusquely, and using the old undergraduate name, "you're discovered."

"As how?"

Max waggled a head at him. "Keep off the ice, my boy, if you don't want to get dragooned. Some of the Elder Statesmen of the Country Club saw you training your Boys' Club team, and your style made their wise eyebrows twitch. Hockey is our winter specialty at the

Club, and if they haven't spotted you yet as the once famous 'Flash' Manning, they at least smell something rattish. You'll be urgently invited to join, with the waiting list all mussed up to let you in, unless I'm mistaken."

"Can't afford it," said Dorr, but there was a tinge of regret in his tone.

"Oh, damn that!" cried his friend impatiently. "I'll lend you the money. . . . No? Well, marry a rich woman for the good of the community. It might be just as well for your own safety, too," he added.

"When I get married for either of those reasons, I'll let you know."

"You'd see some horrible examples of the marital yoke if you went to the Lindsays' dinner, including the host and hostess. Rollo Trent will be there. I've gypped Careth into putting me next to her. Why don't you marry her, Flash? She's got a pleasant little bunch of money."

"You have got her on your mind, haven't you?" retorted the other cheerfully, but inwardly he was a little troubled.

A sentimental encounter between Max's quiet forcefulness and Carol's restless questing might be possibly perilous to both. Giving due weight to Max's essential rectitude, he might nevertheless be swept off his feet by that abounding charm of Carol's, and grasp at the straw of happiness before the dark abyss drew him down. And she, the clear-eyed seeker for experience; was it not at least possible that she should find all-sufficing the passion of a man like Max, with the allurement of his physi-

cal and mental vigor, the spice of his habitually mildly contemptuous attitude toward women, his innate and effortless effect of being somebody, of bulking large against his social background? To a tense, apprehensive, exigent psychological phase such as Rollo was now living in, he might be the fateful answer. . . . Well, why not? After all. . . . Pondering this, Dorr felt an inexplicable personal revulsion which he would not admit as jealousy. Any such feeling where Carol Trent was concerned was dead in the past.

"Where does she get her trick of thinking things out for herself?" pursued the other. "Tags and catchwords seem to mean so little to her, as if she'd figured out her own system of life. It's extraordinary for one of her age, and especially for a girl. She is a girl, too, in every meaning of the word, I believe," he added as if meditating a scientific phenomenon. "*Ca se voit.*"

"Of course that sees itself," confirmed Dorr, a bit angry in spite of himself. "Why shouldn't she be—in every sense of the word?"

"I don't know," said Max vaguely. "Women of independence of spirit are so likely to test theories by facts. Oh, I know; she's very young. I'm not likely to forget that. But where the devil did she get all she knows? She must have had a queer bringing up."

"The queerest. Get her to tell you about it."

"If she will. You get about so far into Rollo's personality, and then she shuts up like a clam. . . . I'm off. Better think over the Lindsay dinner, Flash. I'd admire to watch you in that bunch."

"As an old friend I'll warn Carol against your wiles

and plots," said Dorr, smiling as his guest opened the door.

But his second thought was that the girl would be safer with Max than with anyone else of that set whom she was likely to encounter.

CHAPTER VIII

Whoever promulgated the theory that "pity is akin to love" knew little of male psychology. Pity, in the high-minded type of man, is a solvent of love. It rises above the selfish instinct of desire and submerges it in a higher and selfless emotion.

Dorr Manning had been startled and uneasy at the news of Carol Trent's arrival in Dorrisdale. He did not want his devotion to his work disturbed by outside and possibly engrossing counter-interests. He had run away from Carol abroad—not too soon for his own peace of mind—after a month of fitful association with her in Paris, the ripening of a friendship which had begun on a Swiss mountainside when a snowslip had passed the two of them, then strangers, so close that, together and arm-locked against the threat and the terror, they had looked death in the face and felt the mighty wind of his wing as he swept past them. Thereafter they could hardly continue strangers, and when they met in Paris, something like intimacy sprang up between them. By nature and preference a man's man, as most fine athletes are, Dorr had been drawn more and more to her by the openness and swiftness of her mind, the clear independence of her spirit, her tolerant, if slightly cynical, breadth of view, surprising in so young a girl, her unafraid attitude toward life, and her frank appetite for the enjoyments of the world;

as much by these as by her charm, which was far more than mere prettiness, though she possessed that also in a high degree. But when he awoke to a realization that any day in which he did not see Carol Trent was a lost day, he took that consideration out for an all-night walk on the quays, and at sunrise packed his trunk and departed with only the briefest of good-bys, leaving a puzzled, indignant and rather pale girl behind him.

For Dorr Manning had a stiff and even touchy independence of his own, intensified by the fact that he had been brought up a rich man's son and had seen the riches vanish at a touch. He had no intention of becoming a rich girl's husband; he had seen too many good men go comfortably wrong that way, particularly in the ministry which he expected some day to enter.

When he rediscovered Carol under the shadow of her calamity, he would have married her on a day's notice gladly and loyally and devoted his life to her, even had she been threatened with the loss of fortune as well as the greater loss—more readily, in fact, in that case —had he still believed that he loved her. But the old flame had been so sternly repressed that he himself supposed it stifled. Nevertheless it was a reflex from it, perhaps an unacknowledged dread of its return, that had thrown him upon Careth Lindsay when he learned of the girl's presence in Dorrisdale. And after Carol had revealed to him her innermost soul on that tragic day in the country, he could think of her only as a woman beyond claim and beyond desire, set apart by that doom as behind an impenetrable barrier. He could now admit her freely to his mind, from which he had so

resolutely excluded her, and much of his troubled thought was devoted to her tragedy.

But she had withdrawn herself from him, after that one outbreak of pain and terror, as if in shame of having shown him her naked soul. When they met now she was friendly, but casual, holding their talk to the common currency of local chatter. So, when she called him up at the Boys' Club, he rather wondered. Nor was this feeling assuaged when she asked:

"I suppose you're going to the Lindsays' dinner next week?"

"Why, no; I don't believe I can make it," he replied hesitantly.

"Oh, come on! I want to see you. Got an own-up to make."

"I was going out of town."

"Go some other time. The out-of-town will last longer than the town does. Lock *that* into one of your padded brain-cells."

"All right, I'll come," he agreed.

That it was a weak surrender he realized. The tall young house with wings was a place of danger and enchantment for him, an enchantment of the senses, perhaps, but something more than that, too. Though he had been there but a few times since the first meeting with Careth Lindsay, he recognized the fact that even this was too often. But surely a dinner party was safe enough. And Carol's special reason for wanting to see him, whatever it might be, provided a ready excuse. But the true impulsion lay in Careth's note, still undestroyed on his desk.

"Do come. I want to show you how very circumspect I can be. And the crowd will paralyze you with pious horror. It will be such peerless fun to see you under conditions of public shock—as distinct from private shock! After having played Saving Grace to my Erring Soul, you wouldn't have the heart to drop me now."

It was signed without formal commitment, merely "C. L."

So she was loath to let their strange association lapse. Being essentially free of self-deceptiveness, he admitted to himself that the fortnight since he had seen her had dragged surprisingly, and that the prospect of a further encounter stirred a long-forgotten excitement in him. Oh, well, once wouldn't do any harm. Thereafter he could easily make excuses. . . . Excuses? To Careth Lindsay, whose uncaring independence of bearing was so unexpectedly belied by her pleading eyes? Would they be so easy after all?

Careth Lindsay's parties, though composed of the same set as the Deuces Wilds', were of a very different order. Discretion of behavior was their keynote; there was nothing hole-and-cornery about them. But if the conduct was decorous, the talk frequently was not. It was Tom Lindsay's pride that there was nothing he would not say anywhere, any time, to any woman, and get away with it. He was the handsomest man in Dorrisdale, and about the stupidest, but shrewd enough to maintain a reputation for being amusing by a continuously replenished stock of ultra-risqué stories. On this occasion Careth rather hoped that he would be

mild, not so much on Dorr Manning's account as because Carol Trent had been seated in the place of honor on his right, by his own insistence.

Dorr Manning was too young, too eager, too interested in and hopeful of life to shirk the challenge of his own expectations. He went to the Lindsays', and found himself the guest of honor to the extent of being seated on his hostess' right. On the other side of him was Mrs. Mike Adair. About the table, with careful adjustment for the criss-cross "affairs" of the set, was ranged most of the Dirty Dozen and a fair sprinkling of the slightly more conservative Country Club younger married lot. To the stranger's keenly attentive eyes, they appeared to average high in good looks, higher in effective dress, and highest of all in that provocative spirit which enveloped the No Man's Land wherein the two sexes met and encountered.

In the pre-dinner half hour, devoted to cocktails, Careth had given him an impression of impersonality, remote, brilliant, high-keyed; but once or twice he had thought to feel the butterfly-flutter of her eyes, dreamy, upon him. Emmy Adair had also noted it and now devoted herself with the greater empressement to asserting her rival attractions. She would have liked to lure Careth's reputed "newest heavy suitor" away, not from any feeling against Careth, whom she rather liked, but in the same spirit as she would have won her money at poker. Moreover, she surmised that a flirtation with a man dedicated to some sort of pious works (as she had vaguely heard) might have a special kick for her over-experienced nerves, particularly a man as "gorgeously beautiful," so she put it to herself, as her

neighbor. With the direct audacity which was her "line," she turned the talk at once on Careth, but his defense was so good as to enlist her admiration as well as check her advance. Presently she shifted to Rollo Trent.

"Isn't she a radiant thing tonight! No girl looks like that unless she's in love or ready to be. Who's the lucky one? Tom Lindsay? He seems assiduous."

Dorr frowned. "I hardly think so."

"Well, don't bite poor little me," she besought. "Perhaps it's you."

"You grab the prize as the world's worst guesser," he laughed, recovering himself. "But where do you get your diagnosis of Miss Trent? She looks to me as if she hadn't a care or a thought beyond the moment."

"Because you're a man," was the scornful retort. "But—I've seen her drift a thousand miles away from everything between two moments of the party. Look at her now; right in the middle of Tom's newest and worst story."

"Perhaps it's just as well for her to escape, then," he suggested. But he was troubled. Carol must not give herself away thus. He put all the power of his will into his gaze, forced her eyes to his, and called her back. A swift, dazzling smile was his reward.

"That was very well done, Mr. Manning," approved his neighbor. "Will you call me back when you see me in the dark places?"

"No place could be dark where you are, Mrs. Adair." The banality was well received; too well, in fact, for he felt a slight, appreciative and decidedly more than

friendly pressure beneath the concealment of the table spread.

What was his cue for this? He figured swiftly that the best policy was one of masterly inactivity; to pretend not to notice the significant temptation while playing up to her in speech. Certainly he had no wish to venture into definite flirtation with this fragile, pretty, facile woman. It was a relief when she was drawn into the more general conversation by a call from across the table.

"What does Emmy think of it? She's a second-degree expert."

"In what?" she inquired.

"Marriage."

"Emmy's second represents the triumph of experience over soap," remarked Lloyd Parmenter, who had had a superfluous drink, and thereby evoked a laugh, for Mrs. Adair's first husband had been the proprietor of the Latherquick Shavingstick, whom she had quit (on remunerative financial terms) to marry the easy-going, attractive Micky.

"It's like a ball game," she remarked carelessly. "You don't get really going before the second inning."

"With this difference, that you can't get away with errors in a real ball game," pointed out Milly Wild, maliciously. "They always catch you at it."

"You'll be safe enough in the bleachers, my dear, unless you get hit with a foul ball," retorted Emmy. "Who started this debate anyway, and what's it all about?"

"Roy Bretton claims," her host enlightened her,

"that marriage is a played-out institution and that it's time we found a substitute for it."

"I thought Roy had found that long ago," murmured Cissie Standish.

"He means a respectable substitute."

"Respectable? Roy? How are the flighty fallen!" giggled Warren Graves.

"What's the matter with Roy?" solicitously inquired Monty Standish. "What set him off on this slant?"

"Caroline Catherby," said Mike Adair. "I spotted him cowering and blushing in a corner at her lecture on Modern Marriage and Ancient Morals, just before I was removed from the room, shrieking and with my handkerchief over my encrimsoned face. It was terrific!"

"*Miss* Caroline Catherby," emphasized Careth Lindsay. "Why is it that the self-appointed experts on marriage are always unmarried?"

"Same reason that elderly and presumably maiden ladies invariably write the books about bringing up babies," kindly offered Max Slater. He winked at Dorr and added: "*Omne ignotum pro magnifico.*"

"I also have been to college," said Mike Adair with pathos, "and therefore know that it's Latin. But what, if any, does it mean?"

"Only that what you don't know won't hurt you," Dorr translated liberally.

"No; but there's a lot in what that Catherby hen says," proclaimed Roy. "If you come to think of it, what is marriage, anyway?"

"A grossly public avowal of a strictly private in-

tention," chuckled Warren Graves, and added conscientiously, "That's cribbed from somewhere."

"Marriage is all right," Sally Dangerfield gave her oracular opinion, "if you don't take it too literally."

"There's always the danger," remarked Max Slater, with an effect of ripe consideration, "of a too rigidly fundamentalist application of these simple rules and regulations."

"Somebody's always taking the joy out of life," agreed Careth.

"The main trouble with marriage is men," declared Sally.

"Still, it'd be a dull pastime without 'em," mildly suggested Adair.

"What I mean is, it's always a secondary consideration with men. There isn't one of you that wouldn't rather lose his wife than his wad."

"Good reason why," remarked Tom Lindsay. "We know damn well that if we lost the wad the wife would follow."

"Why should we be the wise guys on the marriage question anyhow?" Parmenter mildly defended his sex. "You women invented it and ever since its invention you've been making its rules and regulations."

"And you've been breaking them."

"We can't break 'em alone and unaided, you know," Max reminded her.

"The rules haven't changed in two thousand years, and life has; that's one difficulty," put in a splendid, lithe, tense-looking woman of thirty seated almost opposite Dorr, whom he had not met.

"Hence the breakage," commented Warren Graves.

"What thinks the scientist about it?" asked his hostess, addressing Max.

"An inextricable mess, I should say. Science has no authority in the matter or we'd be mated for breeding and not for caprice. As it is, marriage is religion's optimistic attempt to adjust two eternally irreconcilable elements."

"Meaning," inquired the woman opposite Dorr, "man——"

"And woman. Exactly. Women are physically monogamous, by instinct, and mentally—emotionally, if you like—polygamous. Just the opposite of men. The modern woman wants more than one man to satisfy her voracious emotional demands, and if she must pay for him by giving up her naturally monogamous preferences, why— At this point the court ordered the room cleared of all young, unmarried women under the age of seventy."

"I've got my toes wound around the leg of the table," averred Molly Wild. "Go on."

"On consideration, I've decided that there's no place to go. Rollo, what are you putting into my champagne?"

"Salt. To balance your line of talk. I don't like it. *I'm* not polygamous."

"You're not even monogamous yet. There's got to be a start somewhere."

"Monogamy—monotony," quoted the woman unknown to Dorr. "I expect that's what's the matter with the whole show. We try to escape the monotony of life alone by doubling up, and then of double life by——"

"Tripling?" queried Adair. "Back to baseball again."

"Anyway, monotony is the thing we're all desperately trying to escape. Hence the pace we hit up."

"But monotony isn't a question of pace, is it?" put in Dorr. "It's a matter of not changing pace. Think of the deadly boredom of always traveling at sixty miles an hour."

"We don't have to think of it; we do it," asserted Jazz Beaumont.

"Well, I'm not bored," proclaimed Sally Dangerfield, rearing up her bold, handsome head and looking about with the incongruously mingled languor and softness of her eyes lighted to challenge, "and I don't care who knows it. I don't believe there's a crowd anywhere has a better time and more of it than the Irresponsibles. Yet we're always doing the same thing with the same people. We play together, travel together, dance together, motor together, eat together——"

"That'll be about enough," cut in Tom Lindsay in pretended alarm. "Some niggah is goin' to tell the troof about dis yeah subjict if we don' adjourn pretty quick. Milly, on Max's well-known, but Latin, principle, you ought to be the wise guy about this. What does marriage look like, from the wild and limitless freedom of the Great Outside?"

"Who? Me?" said the Black Deuce. "I'm still looking for the proper victim to practice it on."

"What are you going to do with him when caught?"

"Spend his money; he's got to be rich. Allow him five years of rejuvenation; he must be over fifty. After that, give me alimony or give me death."

"His, I trust," said Mike Adair. "You'd make a perilous widow, Milly."

"So, Roy"—the girl addressed Bretton serenely—"I'm against your substitute-orium until I've landed my millionaire. It might not be financially binding."

"I think you'll be paying a fair price per year," said the woman opposite Dorr, with an expression which enlightened him to the fact that the girl's plan was actually a matter of reckoned intention and not merely a joke.

"Are you being shocked properly?" asked Careth, leaning to Dorr. "Or only bored?"

"On the contrary, both amused and—educated. Who is the superb leopardess of a woman that just spoke?"

"Dee James. Don't you know her? Pat Scott's older sister. She's one of the tragedies of marriage."

"She doesn't look like a tragedy."

"Game to the core. Her husband is a hopeless paralytic, and always will be."

"What a fate!"

"For her or for him?"

"At the moment I was thinking of her."

Careth shrugged. "It would have suited her just as well if he had been paralyzed before their marriage. She never was in love with him. Never believed that she could be in love with anybody—until she found out too late."

"Good Lord! That's worse still."

"Yet they've made a sort of success of the tragedy, more of a success than the average Dorrisdale ménage. At least, there's devotion."

"That's not enough, is it?"

"It wouldn't be for me." She lowered her voice, looking away from him. "A woman who is a woman wants to have more than that—and to give more. But Dee isn't a woman any more; or if she is, she's a woman living behind an asbestos curtain, safely. I suppose she was once, for that one man. She'd have gone away with him, they say, if just then Jimmie James hadn't had his accident, trying to save a little Italian gutter-snipe from a truck. So she stuck, being a sport."

In spite of his better inner warning he asked abruptly: "Would you?"

"I? Would I?" She asked herself the question and answered with a sort of dreamy fierceness. "If I were Dee's kind of woman and had been touched to fire only once, I'd have followed the flame if it led me down to hell."

"What are you two discussing, religion?" asked Parmenter curiously. "Careth looks all het up."

Wally Dangerfield was booming again. "It's usually the girl's fault that weddings don't turn out better," he pronounced didactically. "They concentrate so on *getting* married that they've got nothing left for the *being* married."

"And what do the men think of, if the girls think only of getting married?" challenged Rollo on behalf of her sex.

"Getting you before some other fellow does," Fanny Parmenter stated, with cool cynicism. "Even at the price of a wedding ring—if he can't do it any cheaper."

"After all, it's the easiest way, and so damned respectable and convenient," spoke up Emmy Adair. "Would you like to hear the truth for once, my Chil-

dren, without sentimentality or bunk? Listen, then, to Old Marm Wisdom. Take a kid of our set; any kid who is reasonably easy to look at and has got the usual allowance of pep. If she keeps her eyes open to what is going on, she begins to have the man-subject called to her interested attention long before she's out of school, and by the time she's fairly grown up, she begins to be at least curious if not interested, and to wonder what it is that makes the darn things act that way."

"What Bobs Osterhout diagnoses as the seventeen-year itch," proffered Wally Dangerfield.

"Not at a dinner table," sharply said Dee James.

"Somebody operate on Dee for an ingrowing sense of propriety," jeered Sally Dangerfield.

"Call for a demi-surgeon," proclaimed Warren Graves sonorously.

Mrs. James wrinkled a fastidious nose. "It isn't propriety; it's decency," she said. "But don't let me interrupt the illustrated lecture."

"Well, you jog along," resumed the expositor, "getting a scare here and a touch of experience there, flirting a bit and jollying a bit and necking a bit, and take a chance or two and get away with it—usually. Well, you're getting maybe toward years of indiscretion—say twenty-one or two—and the Man comes along. He's good looking, like Tom, or a Class A fusser, like Roy, or a fascinating hermit, like Max, or a snappy sport, like Warren. You kiss him a few times and imagine you get a new kind of thrill out of it and you think: 'If this isn't the real, twenty-four-karat thing, it's interesting enough to go on with.' And first you

know you're all netted up like baby's crib in fly-time and trying to keep step with the Lohengrin march without strutting, which, Gawd knows, it can't be done! Yes; it's getting married that's the sporting event. Being married is not as advertised. But, then, nothing is, I expect."

"Anyway, it enlarges the mind, they say," commented Milly Wild innocently.

"*And* the opportunities. Don't forget that."

"The modern husband is liberal with his opportunities; we've got to grant that," said Fanny Parmenter generously.

"There's too much husband in a lot of marriages, though, *I'll* tell the officiating clergyman." It was Sally Dangerfield again, and Warren Graves turned to Wally with a sad, sweet expression:

"Condolences and commiserations, old man. Or congratulations, as the case may be."

"Oh, Wally's all right," defended his wife. "We understand each other. I don't want him infecting the home atmosphere all day long. He's better out of the way. And if he isn't home by midnight, at least I have a fair guess where he is in case the house catches fire."

"Don't look at *me*, Sally," virtuously disclaimed Jazz Beaumont. "I've got my fingers crossed on that big, dangerous man of yours."

"It'll be some time before you have to take medicine for that lonely feeling, Jazz," retorted Sally. "Well, there *are* advantages in the life of a sailor's wife."

"Why doesn't some kind philanthropist endow a fund to provide innocent amusement for temporary widows?" queried Cissie Standish.

"Innocent? Why be so narrow-minded?" reproved Tom Lindsay.

"Well, of course," allowed Sally Dangerfield, "one can hardly expect to find one's own husband exciting all the time."

"Who expects excitement from one's—husband?" countered Emmy with just enough theatric pause to win a thorny crackle of laughter from the table.

"As this conversation is sinking below the high intellectual plane where it started, we'll leave," announced the hostess.

"I thought it was getting a little rough for us men," agreed Mike Adair, "though, of course," he added with the exaggerated bridling manner of a prudish girl, "there is much of what you horrid women say that I neither understand nor *wish* to understand."

After the first round of drinks for the deserted men, Dorr wandered out to look for Carol Trent and find out what it was that she wanted of him, only to see himself forestalled as Roy Bretton, with his conqueror's air, carried her off to the semiseclusion of a pair of seats in the side hall. For a time he drifted indeterminately until Careth, who had contrived to detach herself from her other guests, made opportunity for a moment aside with him.

"Don't take our talk too much at face value," she admonished.

"Thanks for the warning," he smiled.

"Isn't Emmy Adair amusing!"

"She didn't excite me quite to a fever, though."

"How dare you imply that my guests are dull!" she twinkled at him. "You're a monster of ingratitude,

when I put you next to the most dangerous woman in Dorrisdale. You should make more of your opportunities. Instead you sat and gloomed at Rollo Trent."

"Did I? I hope I didn't make it noticeable," he muttered.

"*I* noticed it. But perhaps I'm specially observant about some things. So did Tom, who hasn't as much power of observation as a mud turtle on a log. Tom's quite crazy about Rollo. He specializes in youth. I think it was noble of me to let him have her for dinner, don't you? Especially as she gives all the signs of being out for trouble herself. Shooting craps with the devil, I'd say."

"What makes you think that?"

"Interested, aren't you! Oh, just a woman's reading of another woman. Quite likely I'm wrong. But I get the impression of a sort of desperate and determined gaiety. Let us eat, drink and be merry type of thing. Perhaps she's had her fingers burnt already. I've known it to happen before among the chivalrous manhood of Dorrisdale. Speaking of chivalrous manhood, what do you think of my handsome husband?"

He frowned. "What am I expected to answer to that?"

"Tell me I'm a rotter to ask. I am, rather, you know. But you don't mind, do you? You're a relieving sort of person, you know, Dorr Manning. One can talk to you—if permitted."

"As for that——"

"Did Tom speak to you about joining the club?" she broke in.

"Yes."

"Moral suasion on my part—if it's ever moral to persuade one's husband. You're coming in, aren't you?"

"Wish I could, but I can't afford it," he smiled.

She smiled in return, but wistfully as she said: "What a shameful admission! Most of our men would confess to any crime rather than not being able to afford anything—except the very rich who can afford not to afford. Suppose it were made possible for you to——"

"No; I thank you," was his decisive interruption.

"Afraid I'm trying to bribe you? You might trust my judgment of men further than that."

"I'm sorry."

"Did you ever play the market?"

"My family did. Hence my prevalent brokeness."

"Have you still got that four hundred dollars you were going to lend me?"

"Yes; but I can't afford to gamble with it."

"What I've got in mind isn't nearly as brash a gamble as loaning money to a woman you never saw before. In fact, it's a real tip."

"Isn't that the kind that always goes wrong?"

"Sage young man! But this one isn't. It was given me by a man who—well, he isn't giving me tips that go wrong."

"I see."

She looked at his darkening smile and a little hot wave unexpectedly swept her nerves. So, already she had the power to stir jealousy in him! Though she doubted whether he recognized the emotion. "No; you don't 'see.' Not in that tone. I'm not for sale at any such price, Mr. Manning."

"But I never——"

"Oh, yes you did. For the moment. Well, why not? What do you know about me, after all?"

"Enough to trust you," was the impulsive reply.

"Careful! You don't know what you may be letting yourself in for. Suppose I take you up on it right now. Will you go into this deal with me, and if it pans out, as it will, use the money to join the club?" She outlined concisely the expected course of an oil stock, long torpid on the market but now moving uneasily; what he understood her to describe as being "a good buy." But the modulated flow of technical phrases made only a surface impression upon him, so much more was he concerned with the still beauty of her, the emanation of an intensely feminine atmosphere, his pervasive sense that she was holding herself under control. Against what? Once their eyes met fairly, and hers flamed suddenly, as her speech faltered; then she was back again at the old persuasion.

"We do need you on the team, particularly after the game you put up today in that invitation match."

"I'd love to get into the game again," he admitted, flushing.

"Leave it to me," she bade him softly.

CHAPTER IX

Rollo had set out for the Lindsay dinner feeling "like the fuzz on the orchid—the expensivest kind" as she told Pat Scott in leaving. Always now, whenever she plunged into the Dorrisdale whirl, she had within herself that feeling of excitation, of expectancy, of the imminent and profoundly altering adventure of love awaiting only her decision, her acceptance. Was it love? Had she any right to give that inclusive name to this seeking of hers; this curiosity, more intellectual than physical; this determination, more resentful than prurient, which she had deliberately adopted as a terminal policy?— "For tomorrow ye die."

She had gone to the party with Roy Bretton; so he would appointedly take her home from it. Would it be Roy? And would it be that night? More probably Roy than anyone else; yet—if he were only of more finesse; if he could but understand that to some women the approach should be oblique rather than direct, by suasion rather than attack; "grabbing you by the neck and smearing your face with kissing that you aren't ready for" in Pat Scott's vivid and unalluring phrase. (Oh, yes; Pat had had her troubles with Roy!) Rollo could not but respond to his gallant and conquering attractiveness up to a certain point. Beyond that the instinctive rebel, lying dormant at the core of every woman's being, rose in arms and she turned to her de-

fenses, whether of derision, appeal, or cool repulse. With no special reason she had expected to be seated next to Roy at the table. When she found herself between her host and Max Slater, the little disappointment did more for her distant suitor, now at the further center of the group, than he could know. Most unreasonably she was annoyed with Max, and he, being sensitized to her moods and not being one to brook injustice with Christian meekness, contrived, to Rollo's disgust, to have a very lively time with the appreciative Cissie Standish on his right; specially appreciative because he was an infrequent and prized dinner guest.

At the close of the dinner Roy made a bee-line for Rollo; determination to move mountains out of his path, if needful, patent in his handsome face. Certainly Max was no mountainous obstacle, while Tom Lindsay was compelled elsewhere, to his obvious regret, by his duties. Consequently the resolute suitor had no difficulty in bearing her off to the semisecluded spot near the stairs which he had previously marked down.

"How and where am I going to make this start?" he began.

This was a planned campaign; Roy's usually were. But she liked it none the less for that. "Where you left off last time is the convenient place, isn't it?" she returned.

"With you saying 'Checkmate,'" he answered ruefully. "That seems to be always the last move between us."

"Oh, not *saying*," she expostulated. "I wouldn't be so arrogant."

"You are arrogant, though, you know," he charged;

"for all you give the impression of being so—so ductile."

"What a really gaudy word!" she admired. "Did you have it on your cuff, waiting its little chance to pop out and make a hit?"

"I've got a lot of better ones up my sleeve."

"Keep 'em for a time when you don't look so festal. One oughtn't to be profound while wearing a snappy gardenia like yours." She sniffed appreciatively.

"Like it?"

"Crazy about it."

"It could be had."

"At the usual price, I suppose." (He was playing the old, old gambit—she thought—but what matter? All roads led to the one goal with Roy.)

"At a price beyond price—from you."

"Quite a sparkle to that," she approved. "Well—" She leaned forward and upward to his lips, conscious of deliberate experimentation. How far would he go this time? How far would she yield? And, yielding, how much would she imply in promise? Surprise the first! For once he had the wit to lift his head after that one gentle pressure. He was learning something from experience. "The man's becoming dangerous," she thought amusedly. Under her breath she murmured to him:

"You're no Shylock. Are you!"

He laughed. "There's such a thing as deferred interest on payment—compounded."

"I've been kissed by an arithmetic," she gibed. And then the dreadful thing happened without warning. . . .

Somehow or other Dorr Manning was mixed up in it, like a figure in a delirium. The moment before the

horror, she had lifted her gaze past Roy's eager face, as if responding to a hypnotic summons, to see Dorr standing opposite their nook, and it had been caught by his, half amused, half warning, before the whirling blackness descended. Through the murk she could hear Roy's gay, wooing voice saying something, saying many things without meaning or purport to her; she did not know or care what, so shut off from the living world was she by the cloture of the black terror about her. Then another voice, Max's, calling something, loud and repeated and jocular. Movements around her; a new presence; a hand gripping hers hard. "Steady, Carol," said Dorr's even voice. "It'll be all right." But *would* it—ever? She clung, until the slow lifting of the veil, like the drawing away of a smothering blanket from the deadly struggle for breath.

Wandering about after Careth's dismissal of him to return to her hospitable tasks, Dorr Manning bethought himself again of Carol and wondered what her message for him might be. He found her more by luck than devisement, and was not surprised to discover Bretton as her companion. What did, however, move him to surprise and uneasiness, was the look upon her face as Bretton bent over her; at first he took it for the spell-bound acquiescence of the girl caught in the toils of recognized passion. Then he saw deeper and knew what that expression of frozen terror controlled by iron self-restraint meant.

With instant decision he caught Max Slater, passing with a goblet of punch, by the arm.

"Fake a phone call for Roy Bretton. Long distance. Important."

"What the—" began the annoyed Max.

"Tell you later. Hurry it, will you! And hold him as long as you can."

Going out into the passageway, Slater reappeared giving sonorous voice in the manner of a page-boy. With disgust in his face, Bretton made his apologies and relinquished his place. At once the plotter slipped into it.

"It's Dorr Manning, Carol."

The rapt and stricken face turned uncertainly. "Oh, Dorr! Take hold of my hand. *Tight!*" She dropped a fold of her gown over their clasp.

"How long have you been like this?"

"I don't know. Do I show it terribly?"

"No. Can't you see at all?"

"Yes. Through a thick veil. It's clearing, I think. Bobs said it would, after each attack until—until the final one. I couldn't bear to have it happen here, with people crowding around and pitying me before I could get away. Is there someone coming? Don't let them."

He bent over her with an effect of ardent devotion. "I am now," he said briskly, "recounting to you the exploits of our noble hockey team in last week's game. We played like a bunch of farmers loading turnips into a freight car with three-tined pitchforks. If the Ballingford team hadn't been drunk from the knees down we'd have been smeared. Mid-season slump. . . . Is it coming back?"

"Yes. How did you know, Dorr?"

"I was looking for you and guessed when I saw your face."

"Oh, I'm glad it was you, Dorr! I couldn't have told Roy. Or even Max, though I trust him."

"Old Max is a man you can trust. To the limit. He's one of the rare ones."

"How queerly you said that. As if you were sorry for him."

"Why should I be sorry for him?" he returned brusquely. "Ah; that's better! The color is coming back into your face."

She blinked a little. "I can see you plainly now. But I knew it was you before I could see anything, before I heard you speak; just by the feel of you. That's funny, isn't it?"

"Don't you think you'd better let me take you home?" he asked solicitously.

"I should say *not!* There's a lot of juice left in this evening's orange," she returned with reckless gaiety. "Besides, I've got a confession that I want to get off the old chest. I hate to admit it, but you were right when you said, that day, that no one could reckon how useful their lives might be to other people. I've had it proved to me, though I can't tell you the details. If it hadn't been for our talk, I'd have had one wild whirl of it, and then killed myself, rather than live through the daily suspense of waiting, and—and some people that I'm fond of would have had a bad mess-up because I wouldn't have been there to stop it. Seemed like fate, almost—though you'd call it God, and maybe you're right. It might be easier to snap out of it now and have it all over with, but I suppose it would be

pretty yellow—and I'm not yellow. I'll stick it until——"

"Until?" he prompted gently.

"Never mind. That's my business. I won't burden your conscience with it."

"And what about the project of squeezing the juice out of this orange-shaped world we live in?" he smiled.

"That still goes. So no moral preachments, please." A devil of laughing defiance danced in her eyes as she changed to a rhetorical and stagey tone. "I'm still such as you knew me, Mr. Manning. Still able to look you in the face and tell you to— Well, never mind that. Dorr, would you stop me if you could? The orange-squeezing, I mean?"

"Yes."

"I think that's just a conventional duty-hunch," she retorted with disdain. "However, if you want to appoint yourself my private rescue mission, I'll give you every chance. Come to the Dangerfields' week-end riot next month."

"Why that?"

"To act as my chaperon, of course."

"Aren't the Scotts going?"

"A fine young chaperon, Pat— Well, anyway, they're not going. The Scotts are leading a New Life, as you say in pious circles."

"But why the Dangerfield party in particular?"

"Oh, just a notion that whatever's going to happen will happen there. I don't know how or what or who or even why, but as a star-gazing fortune teller I think that event is shaped a good deal like an unsquoze orange. Every yearly party at the Private Athletic

Club is supposed to ruin at least one reputation *and* its sorrowing owner, and 1923 looks as if it might have my initials carved on its marble front," she concluded hardily.

"Setting aside the fact that I'm not invited——"

"That makes nothing or less. Anybody can be invited by anybody else, and often is. Will you come?"

"As your governess? I think not—with thanks."

"As guardian of my morals. No? *All* right; I'll have to apply to the Salvation Army then to send me a good-looking captain. . . . What became of Roy? Did he rush for help?"

"No. He didn't even know anything was wrong. We skidded him away." He explained the stratagem. The girl chuckled.

"Let him stay," she decided. "And let me think. I can think with you around—if you don't mind."

Closing her eyes she gave herself over to consideration. When Bretton came back he would expect to take her home in his car. Only, she suspected, the highly trained car would not turn homeward but elsewhere. And then—and then? She was sensible of a hot recklessness following upon the shock of her temporary blindness. So short a time left! The little, invisible pagan gods were again whispering in her ears the ancient allurement, the ancient urgency, the ancient threat, "For tomorrow ye die!"

She opened her eyes to see Dorr rising and Bretton approaching, "all made up as a thunder cloud," she said to herself, and was immensely amused and instantly disenchanted by the peevish wrath upon her would-be lover's face. Coolly she dispatched him after Max

Slater, on the purely fictional pretense that Max had the next dance with her; not that she was conscious of wishing to see Max particularly, but he was the most convenient defense against Roy. Puzzled and disgruntled, Roy obeyed and presently Max appeared in an atmosphere of polite incomprehension. Though his lips did not, his eyebrows plainly said, "What's the idea?" with an effect of virtuous and forbearing patience which annoyed Miss Trent excessively. She at once resolved to give him a run for his money.

"Have you forgotten that this is your dance?" she inquired.

"I can't have forgotten it since I never knew it," he replied bluntly.

"But it is," was her shameless persistence. "Shall we dance or sit out?"

"As you've probably given it to a couple of other partners we'd better sit."

"Why are you being so poisonous to me, Max?" she wheedled pathetically.

At this he at once became more unpleasant. "Did Roy walk out on you?"

Wrath of the most righteous flared in Rollo until she perceived that he was much annoyed, whereupon she grinned. To grin and still look pretty is the rarest of feminine gifts. Rollo looked ravishing. Max pointedly shifted his gaze. She set down to her credit one more tally on her private account.

"Left me flat, like a tire," she averred with cheerful mendacity. "Don't I look forsaken?"

Max growled.

"Do you know that you weren't at all up to mark as a dinner chum?" she accused.

"What's your standard?"

"We-ell, I expect at least one of my neighbors to make some sort of bluff at making love to me."

"I've got a sore knee," said Max deliberately and outrageously.

"Max! You're *revolting!* You know I hate that sort of thing." Then she caught his grin and crossed out her one score to the good. Well; he wouldn't get her goat again so easily.

"If you do, you pick 'em on a queer principle."

"Meaning Roy, I suppose."

"He's the great peace-chief of the Pawnee tribe."

"I like him," asserted Rollo.

"You would."

She sat up a bit straighter to look at him intently. "Why would I?"

"How do I know? You answer."

"Natural hellishness, you probably think." She knit her clear-marked, straight brows, as if lending conscientious consideration to the subject. "Maybe it's only bad bringing up."

"Yes; I've heard something about that, also."

"*Have* you? Who's your informant?"

"It's one of the things I wanted to ask you about at dinner," he said, without troubling to answer her query.

"Oh! That's what you were fumbling about, was it? I couldn't quite make out."

"Not that you were trying over-hard. I never saw you in a more difficult mood."

"What started you on my life history?"

"Something that Flash Manning said."

"That seems such a funny name for Dorr," she reflected interestedly. "It came from his hockey, didn't it? Yet there is a kind of quickness and unexpectedness about him, too. What did he tell you?"

"Only that your education had been out of the ordinary run for a girl."

"Probably the worst in the world," said she sunnily.

"Going to tell me about it?"

"Certainly. I just *love* to talk about myself," gushed Rollo.

"Oh, in that case——"

"Sit *down*, Max, and don't be so fussy! Have I got to be serious about myself with you?"

"No. I think, myself, it's rather a joke, the way I feel about you."

"It's not!" She was suddenly vehement. "I won't be a joke to you." She dropped her hand upon his, and let it rest there with light, friendly weight. "Of course I'll tell you, Max. It was mostly Grandfather. He was an old Tartar."

"Did he bring you up?"

"If you don't much care what you mean by what you say."

"You didn't have much love for him, I judge."

"I admired him," said she unexpectedly. "He was so absolutely faithful to his creed, such as it was."

"Did he inculcate it into you?"

"That's what's the matter with the dern thing," she retorted. "He did his best or worst. He hadn't any religion, he hadn't any principles, or standards or beliefs, except for one fundamental thing that he called

honor, and that he used to preach at me by the hour. There was only one test of honor, and it was the same in every part of the world, and for every kind of people. The only difference between man and the beasts was that man can pledge his faith and keep it. He used to say that the only salvation was truth, and the only damnation a broken word. He used to say— Am I boring you, Max?"

"Not exactly!"

"Oh, he was a weird and wicked old lad. I can see him yet, sitting in his straight-backed chair, rigid and hard and lean like a hickory post, telling me: 'You're cursed from birth by being a woman. Women are liars because they are cowards, and cowards because we men have let them substitute a shibboleth of virtue for the reality of honor. You are even taught by the best authorities to consider virtue and honor the same. Women's virtue! An asset on the bargain counter that we call marriage. Chastity! A vestigial remnant of an ancient superstition, to be sloughed off in the natural processes of life like one's first teeth.' Am I shocking you horribly, Max?"

"Not yet."

"Then I'll go on. So-called impurity, he said, was only the unchastity of the body, but broken faith was the unchastity of the soul. If all men kept faith there would be no need of laws or religion or commandments. Then he'd turn on me with all his sharp, white old teeth showing like an intellectual wolf, and swear that if I ever went back on my given word to man or woman, he'd return from the dead and drag me down to hell. He always insisted that he expected and preferred to go

to hell because he'd found that religious people so often substituted their religion for honesty and cheated their way through the pearly gates. Oh, it was a grand little bringing-up that I had from him. One of his ambitions was to make me as little of a girl and as much of a boy as he could."

"I can't give him much on that, though," remarked Max.

"No. The *ewige weibliche* in me was too strong for him. As soon as he died I reverted to type. But otherwise he completely corrupted my ideas and morals, judged from the regular point of view." She smiled up at him, looking appallingly innocent and young. "Can you blame me, Max, if I don't think so highly of the rules of the game, for women, or regard myself as necessarily bound by them?"

He drew his hand away, giving her the hard, close look which she had come to know without quite understanding. "So that's your particular line, is it?"

"Line?"

"Your lure. Your come-on," he said harshly. "That's what you've been leading up to—trying to put over. The bluff of being emancipated, free of the usual conventionalities. 'Try me and see how far I'll go,' and all the time, cold like a frog. I think," he decided deliberately, "I prefer the straight appeal of the necker, the Deuces Wild stuff. At least, it's something besides words."

Her eyes narrowed and smoldered upon him. "You can be a sickening toad when you want to!"

"Didn't you ask for it?" he retorted furiously.

"Oh, Max; old Max!" she said with a total change

of tone. "I've hurt you, haven't I! And I didn't mean to."

"Of course you meant to! Knowing that you had the power, and being a woman."

She laughed not untenderly. "I can't get away with any little thing tonight, can I? All right; perhaps I did mean to, but not too much. Anyway, it wasn't a bluff; I've been perfectly straight with you. And now you and I are miles apart all of a sudden. How did we get that way?"

"God knows. I haven't an idea," was his rueful rejoinder.

"It's all quite true about what I believe. My real ideas would shock a harem. The words and standards that you live by or expect your pet women to live by —though you only expect 'em to pretend to live by them," she qualified scathingly, "don't mean much to me. It is my bringing-up of course. A developing girl can't have ideas hammered into her plastic mind by hard logic, day after day, and not have them stick. Grandfather's did stick. Now ask me if I'm a virtuous girl, will you?" she challenged coolly.

"No."

"Why not? Don't you care?"

"Would you care whether I cared?"

"It wouldn't change my attitude, nor alter my self-respect."

"Well, I do care."

"How much do you care?" She could no more have kept herself from asking the question than——

"I'll tell you sometime, when I get ready—perhaps." So that was all she got out of *that* lead.

"Anyway, I don't want you to care." The flash of claws there.

"You needn't be afraid I'll bore you with it."

At that she laughed. "Did any woman ever find you a bore, Max?"

"Haven't given many of 'em the chance."

"Honored, I'm sure," she mocked grandiosely.

"But not interested—as for instance with Bretton."

"That's the first really childish break you've made. I'm delighted with it."

"Set it down to jealousy."

"No; I don't just see you being jealous."

"Don't you! Your rating as a mind reader is Lower Moron, Class Z."

"Many and hearty thanks. Max, why did you fake that call for Roy?"

"Some idea of Manning's."

"Did you guess there was trouble?"

"Yes."

"But you haven't asked me a thing about it."

"No."

"Why not?"

"From a suspicion that it was something you didn't care to tell me."

"Right-o," she said softly. "But not for the reason you think. *You're* not so absolutely minus as a mind reader. And, Max, dear, I do want you to care. But not too much."

"Too much? I couldn't," he returned quietly. And then she was sorrier than ever.

In Bretton's car an hour later she said with invin-

cible calmness: "I'm sorry, Roy, but when I say home, I mean home."

"You always do, with me," said the disconsolate cavalier, upon which she relented enough to inform him, with a dazzling smile:

"This isn't our last night on earth, you know."

But if it were, she told herself with a conviction which she could not quite analyze, it would have been "home" with the same irrevocable decision.

CHAPTER X

Having interfered with such effect in Patricia Scott's affair, Rollo had carried it through. She had sent to Cary Scott a wire, addressing it to his business representative in Pittsburgh.

"Ask no questions but return at once if possible. All well and nothing to worry about. Rollo."

She could trust Cary to trust her and obey. Between those two, so far apart in age and circumstance, there had sprung up one of those swift, warm, instinctive and understanding friendships which can exist between people of opposite sex only when both are by nature exceptionally frank, clear-minded and honest; then they take on a special quality of sympathy because of the diversity of sex. Rollo felt for her young cousin's forty-year-old husband a lively admiration, and a quiet sympathy for his profound, anxious, and restrained passion for the elfish and headstrong girl he had married.

As he jumped from the train and hurried to her with his quick half-smile, his athletic grace, and the unconscious distinction of his bearing, she wondered indignantly how Pat could find any attraction in the companionship of a cheap little waster like Warren Graves. Comparison between the two men was too absurdly to the advantage of the husband in everything but age.

"Pat's all right," she answered his unspoken query. "Why did you stay away so long?"

"I couldn't get back, as you know."

"No; I don't know. How should I?"

"I wrote Pat."

"She's had nothing from you but that scrimpy postcard."

"Not from me, but surely from the doctor."

"Cary! Have you been ill?"

"Not exactly ill. I foolishly thwarted a fat lady in her ambition to coast all the way down a long flight of icy steps. It cost me a couple of ribs, temporarily."

"We haven't heard a word about it," cried Rollo.

"That fool hospital doctor promised to write; perhaps he got the address wrong. That would explain her letter, forwarded to me at the hospital—in part."

"The nasty one? Yes; that was pique. Why didn't you phone or wire?"

"Why worry her about a thing that sounds so much worse than it is?" he returned lightly. "To be quite frank, I was foolishly annoyed by her letter, too. Besides, she'd have felt that she ought to come to me, and either she'd have come, which would have been a nuisance, or she wouldn't—which would have been worse," he added, in a lower voice.

"Oh, Cary! You idiot! Don't you know *anything* about the woman you've married?"

He smiled ruefully. "Is Pat really a woman? Or only a child? Or a mixture of elf and human being?"

Rollo's eyes were serious. "She's a woman—for you, if you're wise enough to make her be one. But not the 'sailors' wives' sort of thing. That'll never work with

her. Being a part time, part life wife isn't going to be enough for Pat; she demands more. If you're going to pamper her and coddle her and do the eternally protective act and try to shield her from all the rough stuff of life, she'll go out looking for trouble for herself." A quick gleam shone in the speaker's eyes. "If you weren't so proud and haughty and poisonously correct about your behavior, I'd tell you to go home now and beat her up; yes, I would! As it is, I don't need to tell you to be gentle with her. But, oh Cary! do try to be intelligent. It's—it's important."

He stood looking at her, silent, with bent brows, and again a disgusted wonder swept her that Pat could so much as give a thought to any other man. He asked no question; it would be impossible for him, she knew, to interrogate any other person about his wife, and she saw no good in attempting to forestall the situation. Presently he said:

"Aren't you coming back with me?"

"No; I'm booked for the Lindsays' dinner." She spread her cloak to show the gleaming evening dress beneath.

"You look in dangerous form for it," he smiled. "Pat not going?"

"She's waiting for you; wanted to see you alone."

"Good night, Rollo. You're a dear!"

At the sound of the front door opening to her husband's key, Pat Scott jumped from the depths of the lounge and stood with her hands behind her, leaning against the end of the big table. It was in that room that he had first seen her, a hoyden girl of seventeen. She seemed scarcely older now, with her slim, boyish

body, her big eyes gleaming from amidst a tangle of shaken hair, the rich, husky contralto of her voice as she spoke his name. He advanced toward her.

"Wait!" she said. "I've got something to tell you first."

He halted. "Well, Pat?"

She did not make good the implied promise, but went off on one of her unforeseeable tangents. "Cary, have you been true to me—since you've been away?"

He studied her. "Do you seriously want me to answer that?"

She sighed. "No. It's no use. But I wish you hadn't—almost. How I'd hate you!" she flashed savagely. "And I wouldn't have any right to; not much right, anyway; but it would make it so much easier for me," she muttered. A long pause. "*You're* not making it any easier, so far as I can notice," she cried in a tone of petulant accusal. "Why don't you ask me?"

"I am not going to ask you anything."

"But you're going to think—I didn't! I didn't! I *didn't!*" she half wailed. "But I almost did. I would have, but for Mona."

"Mona? Your mother?" he repeated dully.

"Yes. She came back. On the balcony, up there. Just as real as if she had been alive. Just as it seemed that it didn't matter what happened to me because you didn't love me any more, and you'd stayed away from me all this time, and you didn't write to me except that *putrid* little postal card, and—and—Cary, *why* did you stop being my lover and begin to make a noise

like a husband?" Child-like, Pat-like, she was shifting the blame to him.

"I never stopped being your lover; not for a moment," he said sternly.

"You have. You've stopped flirting with me. You stopped telling me you loved me, sometimes days at a time. Don't you know that a woman always has to be told that she's loved, to keep her heart warm and happy; especially a child-woman?"

At that word his face changed. "Have I let myself forget that that is what you are?" he murmured. "A child-woman."

She saw the rigor pass from his eyes; her throat caught on a dry sob. "Oh, Cary!" she choked, and rushed upon him like a little tigress.

Instinctively he warded her off. She shrank back with a cry of fury and dismay. "Oh! You feel that way about me. I loathe you!"

"Pat! It isn't that. I've been hurt. Nothing serious," he added, as she gave a gasp of alarmed tenderness. Holding her close to his uninjured side he explained. At the end she looked up at him with stricken eyes. "What a beast, what an unutterable beast I'd have been! Now I've got to tell you everything, and get it off my chest, and it's—it's almost more than I can cope with. I can't cope at all if you look at me, Cary."

She made him lie on the lounge, propping him around with pillows for his comfort, took her place behind his head, drew a long, apprehensive breath of determination, and spoke. Self-indulgent though she was, Pat was too inherently honest to spare herself. She told

everything except the name of her partner in the adventure. He listened without comment, interruption, or movement, his eyes closed.

"Now you know it all," she said with a deep-fetched sigh of conclusion. "If it hadn't been for Mona," she added and broke off, in an upsurge of jealousy. "I'd like to know whether she came back to stop me because she loved me or because she once loved you."

"What does it matter?"

She stirred uneasily at his changed voice. "Have I hurt you terribly, Cary?"

"It hasn't been overpleasant," was the grim reply.

"Do you h-h-hate me?"

"No; I don't hate you."

"But you don't love me any more."

"Have you so little understanding of my love for you?"

She twined her fingers in his hair, let her cheek drop for a moment upon his forehead. But at once her curiosity, her unappeased desire for sensation aroused itself to feline life. "What would you have done if I *had* crashed, Cary? Killed me?" Her tone was expectant.

"No."

"Oh," she returned, a little disillusioned; "left me?"

He brushed her hand from his head. "Would you have expected me to stay?"

"I don't know what I'd have expected. I don't really ever know what to expect from you. You keep me guessing. Is that clever of you, or is it just the natural you? You are too clever for me, Cary. . . . Why don't you ask me who the man was?"

"It isn't important. I'm not interested in the man, but in you. What could it matter who he was if—if you loved him?"

"I don't. I couldn't," she cried vehemently. "I couldn't love anyone but you. That makes it all the worse, doesn't it! What's the matter with me, Cary? What makes me like that?" An elf-light sprang to sudden radiance, deep in her shadowed eyes. "Bobs was right," she announced calmly.

"About what?"

"About me. He knows me better than you do; he ought to, having brought me up by hand. When I was having my hectic whirl before you came back and made me marry you, he said God help the man who married me, because one love would never be enough to hold me for long. This last experience," she announced reflectively, "has taught me something I hadn't realized before."

"If it has suggested to you," said her husband grimly, "that the *ménage à trois*, which is so popular an institution in Dorrisdale society, is suitable for introduction into this household, it's as well that you mentioned it. I may have something to say on the subject."

She gave her shoulders a wriggle, all *petite gamine* again. "Oh, you ought to be the last to object," she averred airily.

He sat up, suppressing a groan as the unguarded movement wrenched his bones. "Your Dirty Dozen type of humor doesn't appeal to me at the moment."

"It isn't humor. It's in earnest. I was thinking"—she let her eyes, full of shadowed laughter, wander to

a dim corner of the room, as if the darkness represented a curtain to be pierced—"of a 'certain party' for the third in our ménage, and he—or she—would be as much yours as mine."

"*Pat!*"

"Lie back, Cary. Remember you're a sick doggie, and shock is bad for your poor nerves. And I suppose I *have* shocked you with my rough, rude, girlish frankness. I ought to have done it the way they do in the nice, pious little stories where, when a blushing wife speaks to her blushing hubby on the blushing subject of having a blushing baby, she stutters and blathers, and blurbs and bleats in the most lovely and asinine language, to inform him of a fact that's probably as much his fault as her own——"

"Pat! are you going to have a baby?"

Pat's face changed (by an effort of artistic virtuosity on the part of its owner), from the *petite gamine* to the cherubic innocence type. "We-ell, I hope so."

"When?"

She dropped her cool fingertips over his eyes. "How do *I* know, old dear? That's up to you."

CHAPTER XI

Frost and sunlight mingling to form the wine-cold air. A blithe wind of the north, whistling a summons to the strong-blooded to come out and sport with lusty old Winter. Snow spray skimming the lucent-black plane of the lake, dividing, rising in forms like lovely, dancing girls who whirled and ran, finally to be caught up again into the arms of the laughing lover-sky. Two figures, close-rhythmed in the long curve and swoop of their progress, silent but for the clean tingling of steel upon ice. All around them the crystal glory of the great February frost.

The woman slipped away from her companion, spun about like a wind-driven leaf, flung her arms wide and gave a long, clear, exultant call, "wild voice pealing up to the sunny sky," which the small hills caught and tossed among them and sent back in reëchoed waves.

"Hear them welcoming us," she triumphed, returning to the man in a wide, clean curve. "They wait for me every season, the little winter pixies in the hills, as soon as they've got my lake all nice and hard and smooth for me."

"This must be a big day for them," said the man, smiling.

"Isn't it, just!" She sent a bird note winging and the pixies got it and juggled it and laughed. "They're wishing they were alive. Like us. I'm all-over alive

today; fearfully and dangerously so. Come on; we ought to be turning back." She stretched out furred hands to him.

"It's early."

"If I let you overskate on the day of a game, what'll the hockey committee do to me? You're our main reliance for the championship, you know."

"Oh, nonsense! Anyway this'll just put me on edge for tonight."

"I think the club ought to give me the cup if the team comes through, for bullying you into joining. 'Presented to Mrs. Thomas Lindsay in recognition of her judgment, tact, and obstinacy as a scout.' What a time I had, dragooning you into it!"

"You never did tell me what turn it was that made me so suddenly and vulgarly rich under your manipulations," he reminded her, a line of trouble appearing in his face.

"In Hardpan Oil? The one I was tipped off to, of course," she returned calmly, but her eyes were wary.

"There's something I've got to ask you. You won't think me ungrateful?"

"I shall if you are ungrateful."

"I'm not. But I've got to get this thing clear. I understand you to say that you had inside information regarding some inside movement in Hardpan, and that it was a good buy. And yesterday I overheard Monty Standish refer to that Hardpan tip as the worst washout that ever hit Dorrisdale."

Careth was ready for this. "So it was for those on the wrong side of it. I was on the right side; the selling side. I never told you it was a good buy. What I

said was 'There's going to be something doing in Hardpan, and when the turn comes—good-*by!*' She laughed. "It's as well that I handled the deal and not you."

This was straight, whole-cloth lying. Careth was in wrong on the tip, which was well meant as a killing, when an unforeseen irruption of the salt, salt sea had disastrously watered Hardpan's market value, wiping out her own margin as well as her protégée's. In this dilemma she had not only covered his losses, but had produced for him a handsome profit out of her own imagination, backed by her abundant bank account. For this she had more than recouped herself by betting, with characteristic boldness, on the first three games of the interclub championship, all of which the home team had won, thanks largely to Manning's speed. She now regarded him as her special "lucky hunch," and was already taking odds on the championship.

"Is that the way it was?"

"Of course it is. Don't be a dim-wit." Her smile was candor itself.

Was it significant of a conscience already relaxing, of an ascendancy already being subtly and secretly exerted, that he accepted this too ingenious explanation without pressing his suspicions? They skated back, beating their way strongly into the strong wind.

"Do you know, I'm getting drunk on this air?" she announced. "Soused, spiffed, pickled, *and* shellacked. Can you understand that?"

"Can I! I'm getting a fine young shine of my own."

She brought up short with a whirring side scrape of

steel. "You're growing less and less churchy every time I see you. My evil influence?"

"Do you want me less churchy?" he asked gravely.

"Of course. You may think you look saintly seen through a stained glass window, but for the ordinary purposes of life I prefer you plain."

"What have you got against the church, Mrs. Lindsay?"

She had resumed the battle against the wind and taken a score of strokes before she answered with deliberation, "Well, for one thing, it married me."

"It marries most people."

"It does. Without taking the trouble to tell them anything about what marriage really involves—the girls, anyway."

"Is that kind of education the church's business?"

"The church lays down the rules of the game; arbitrary and final rules, too, without any appeal to the referee; why shouldn't it teach us how to play it? Oh, I know I must be scarifying your pious innards if you regard marriage as a sacrament, as a good young saint should. Sacrament! It's an experiment, usually, and for the girl, a desperate one."

"But the twentieth century girl is supposed to know —well, almost everything there is to know."

"How? By instinct?" she retorted scornfully. "That know-it-all attitude is a bluff mostly. We pretend a lot, but when it comes down to facts, we only guess with a sort of feverish expectation. A lot of us guess wrong. Oh, well! What's the difference!" She sheltered her eyes from the brilliance, gazing out across

the glittering world. "This lovely, empty stillness always makes me want to spill my soul."

"The confessional of the open," he smiled. "Well—why not, Careth?"

At this, his first and unconscious use of her given name, she looked up quickly, but said only:

"Later perhaps, when I'm soberer. Now I want just to go fast and fight the wind and drink the sunlight. Couldn't you imagine that we're skimming the surface of a great, gleaming, changeful opal with the eternal fire at its heart? That's what the world looked like to me once. But the fire's never there when you try to warm yourself at it, not even if you're willing to risk being burned for the sake of the warmth. All cold!" She shivered throughout her body. "Don't ask me if I'm catching cold or anything inanely physical like that, or I'll skate away hating you forever."

"Do I look so stupid—or churchy—that you think I can't understand?"

"How should you understand a woman like me?" she retorted harshly. The next instant she had found a smile. "Come back to the tall young house with wings—I always think of it like that now—and have some tea and I'll promise not to bore you any more."

"Do you really think you're boring me?"

"Right!" she confessed gayly. "It *was* a pose. And I don't have to pose for you, though I pose for everybody else on earth including myself, occasionally—I have to or I wouldn't like myself at *all* sometimes. Why not for you, I wonder. Not worth while? Is that it? Stop me as soon as I begin to pick at the counterpane."

He chose to ignore this entirely. "Give you twenty strokes and race you to the landing," he said.

At the finish he was at her elbow, though she skated as the falcon flies. "That's the way to sweep the cobwebs out of your sky," she panted as he took off her skates and his own. "Hope old Bildad the car hasn't frozen his susceptible stripes."

So much difficulty was encountered with drifts before they reached the state road that dusk had already closed about them. The tall young house with wings looked alluringly warm, secretly welcoming as they entered.

"Cocktail or tea?" she asked as she spread her hands to the fire.

He shook his head. "Training, you know."

"Then I won't, either. Mind if I put out these lights?" Action followed close on the word, his assent being assumed. "Is it a sign of depravity to love the dark? It ought not to be; so many gentle little things do, deer and mice and the soft-flying moths. And you can see so much in it that your eyes can't see. You might even see the inside of a woman's soul. Have you ever seen that, Dorr Manning?"

He stirred and sighed.

"Not? And you an expert on souls! What would you think it might be like?"

Intensely aware though he was of her nearness, of her glamor, his thoughts went wide for the moment to Carol Trent and her ordeal. "A black whirlpool," he muttered. "Or, it might be, the holy of holies."

"Neither," she denied. "Not the kind of woman I'm thinking of. Her soul is a cramped and starved

and frustrated thing, a pitiful dwarf, staggering under its body like a snail with a shell too big for it, trailing and crippling through the mire with its poor, blind face turned toward the stars. There's a Portrait of the Artist for you! Like it?"

"No. Nor believe it."

"Posing again, Careth?" She put the question to herself and answered herself. "No; that isn't pose. It's true, underneath the embroidery. I always embroider. One has to; the pattern of life is so ugly. Speaking of embroidery, have you heard the scandal of my latest exploit? Don't answer; I saw you jump. Your reverend boss evidently told you; warned you, probably, against association with a woman so lost to decency that she was caught spooning with a man like a couple of sloppy high school kids. In the lobby of the church, too. Pretty rotten, eh?"

"How can I tell whether it was rotten or not when I don't know the circumstances?"

"Charity? From you! Then I think I'll tell you about Aaron Bent. You know him; he plays the violin obbligatos in the choir, and he and I had been rehearsing. Aaron's a helpless, dull, drunken waster with just one thing that too much money couldn't smother in him, the song in his heart. He's been in love with me for years, and I let him be. Yes, I more than let him be; I play up to it and play back, because of what I can help him do with his composing. If I withdrew from him what little I give, it would be the end of his music. I'm the mother of his songs." She laughed softly.

"You've had your chance of other motherhood," he said heavily.

"Preaching now?" she asked suspiciously. "No; I don't believe you mean it that way," she decided. "You said that as if you hated to say it. Did you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"I think you're lying to me," she returned softly. She shook her head. "No. I couldn't have children by Tom Lindsay; not by a man I don't love; that would be a little too much to endure. But I can have songs by a man I don't love because I love his music. And I've got a right to what little I can get out of life; haven't I? *Haven't* I?" Her voice quivered upward into passionate assertion of her claim. "Ah, I wish I could make God understand that."

"Have you tried?"

"No use. He's a churchy God; He only understands special churchy language."

"He's whatever kind of God you make Him by thinking of Him."

"Then I'd make Him a woman's God. I could pray then, in music, and perhaps He'd understand it." Rising, she moved across to the piano, seated herself on the bench, wove her fingers among the responding keys. From the hallway a ray of soft light fell across her face. In its relaxment, its veiled unconsciousness of the outer world, its superconsciousness of the inner, he read hunger and sadness and a wistful challenge to life. "A prayer," she murmured. "A prayer for women by a woman to the God of women." Her head

slowly lifted and the spirit of beauty eternal spread its aura about her as the music of her hands took form in a rippling current of minor cadence, through which her words, not sung but rhythmed in an even, toneless softness, welled up from beneath the surface like eddies in a shadowed pool.

"*God of woman, if such God there be, hear a woman's prayer. Grant me one wish, Thou who hast made me woman; give to me to be a woman to the uttermost. To draw from my womanhood all that in it lies before it withers, all of beauty, of vitality, of eagerness, of delight to take and give again, while yet it endures. Let me not die, unfulfilled. For myself, that prayer, O Lord!*"

The tone lifted, pulsing with a deeper, sadder passion.

"*For all women, O God of women, this my greater plea. Pity, O pitiful God, those whom thy child, Love, has denied of their birthright. Pity those shamed ones who yield the body where the soul does not follow. Pity, oh, pity, the sorrowing who give heart and soul where the body may not cleave. Give them, before the end, their right of womanhood. The dark years come so soon, so soon. A little respite, O Lord! A little surcease of the yearning; a little loosing of the chains. Hear Thou a woman's prayer.*"

The music died. Careth's hands had fallen into her lap. She bent over the silent keys, her eyes empty, her lips stilled. . . . She stirred, shivered—*Crash!* A wild, shattering discord jarred through the darkness, resolving itself into the hateful chatter of a rag, as the voice broke into a taunting, mocking melody—

"Ah want nobuddy but you, Bill;
Ah want nobuddy but yoo-oo-oo-oo!
Want nobuddy——"

"Don't!" Dorr Manning had jumped to his feet, was at her side, his hands grasping at her arm.

"No?" she laughed harshly. "Why not?"

"It's blasphemy—after that other. It isn't—you."

"Oh, yes, it is. It's the usual me. It's the safe, if not quite sane me."

"It isn't! I won't have it so," he denied vehemently. Unconscious of what he was doing he shook her like an inanimate thing. For a moment she went limp in his strong grip, then wrenched herself away from him.

"You hurt me."

"Hurt you?" he repeated, stupidly, incredulously. "*You*, Careth?"

"It's nothing. I—liked it." She floated forward. For one unbelievable, breathless moment her cheek touched his, was pressed hotly to it, withdrawn. Nothing more. But both stood, shaking and white.

"I think you'd better go now," she said quite low and clear. "And I think—you'd better—never—come back." Then, in a torn cry: "Ah, *do* come back!"

Come back? Dared he come back? The clean chill of the winter wind outside cleared without cooling his mind. He recognized the chances, the probabilities of the situation plainly enough. Was he in love with Careth Lindsay? She had stirred him profoundly, and not by physical appeal alone; but in the turbulent emotion which she inspired was an unease, a distrust. Not of her; she had been toward him frankly, unre-

servedly woman; but of himself, his own insurgent feeling.

Intermingled with the sense of her warm, velvety femininity was the unwelcome thought of the financial deal in which she had involved him. The practical implications of that would hardly bear thinking about. Had she protected him against loss with her own money? What would he think of a woman who should accept such a favor from a man? And how much worse, a man from a woman! Especially a woman to whom he was being powerfully and dangerously drawn in the possibility of a relation in which a money element would be fiery poison. For a man of Dorr Manning's tradition and temperament, this was an intolerable thought. But, after all, she may have told him the truth. He did not want to stultify himself by making a fuss over nothing. Anyway, he must have it out with her; be sure where he stood before there could be any irrevocable commitment between them.

But in order to clear up the point, he must see her again, come back, as she had called him, in that cry from her hungering heart. And he knew that, for the sake of both of them, he must never come back.

Deeper, still, he foreknew that he would.

CHAPTER XII

THREE o'clock, boomed the huge Dangerfield clock through the dark house. Instantly the mechanical organ at the end of the hall struck up a jaunty and appropriate melody,

"Three o'clock in the mo-orning.
Toodle-dee oo-de-*ay!*"

the signal for the beginning of the crowning revels. A stir of excitation, indefinable, atmospheric, permeated the place like a hot sigh of wind.

Up in her second floor room Rollo Trent thrust her stockinged feet into Chinese slippers and tied her heavy kimono dressing gown about her. In the two hours since she had come upstairs she had not wholly undressed, but had stretched herself in the chaise-longue at the window and let her nervously exalted brain range back over the crowded events of the three weeks that had passed between the Lindsays' dinner and the present week-end party at the "Private Athletic Club," as the Wally Dangerfields' vast and elaborate establishment was locally termed. Even in tolerant Dorrisdale, the Dangerfield festals were reputed rough. Pat Scott, who, with her husband, had declined the invitation to the Big Event, had been inclined to remonstrate when her cousin announced her intention of going. But Rollo

was resolved. There might not be so many parties left for her that she could afford to miss any, though of course she gave Pat no intimation of this. She had had another warning in the form of an attack of dimmed vision, and Dr. Osterhout had been so pityingly noncommittal as to convince her that her time might be short. She had accepted the Dangerfield invitation on the express understanding with herself that she did not care now what happened to her—provided only that something happened.

Three significant elements contributed to her informulate but nevertheless definite intention. Dorr Manning had finally and positively refused to attend. Thus the only restraint which she would perhaps have been willing to admit was lacking. Roy Bretton was there, and Roy had been constantly in attendance upon her since the half-repulse, half-compact of the Lindsay dinner, holding himself better under control and therefore the more dangerous and attractive. Thirdly, Maxwell Slater, rather to her flattered surprise, had come, making it clear enough that her presence was what had brought him. He gave her the uneasy, though not wholly unpleasant feeling that he was watching her constantly and unobtrusively—no; not so much watching her as watching over her. The rest of the party was made up of the Parmenters, Tom and Careth Lindsay—the latter, Rollo thought, rather pensive and withdrawn—the Mike Adairs, the Deuces Wild, the Monty Standishes, Warren Graves, Bill Grant, and Jessamine, otherwise "Jazz" Beaumont, whose husband, Sam Beaumont, had unexpectedly turned up from a four months' South American hunting trip that very

morning, and, amidst much joshing, had been relegated to a bed in the bachelor wing while his wife was in the room next to Rollo's. It was the rule of the Dangerfield house parties that the "co-educational dormitory system," as Wally Dangerfield called it, should be invariable and inviolable; he added that this was the only concession to the proprieties expected of guests. Beaumont, a hard, laughing, blue-eyed man of thirty-five, immediately set to making violent love to Rollo, who found him sufficiently amusing to play back to appreciatively. Headlong love-making and swift (and sometimes unforeseen) results was the rule at the Private Athletic Club.

Until his arrival, Rollo's time had been fairly apportioned among several eager aspirants in the winter sports which made up the bulk of the three days' program. Roy Bretton, who had taken over the rôle of general master of ceremonies with a mandate to keep things going at top speed, alcoholically and otherwise, had nevertheless been able cleverly to pick her as his partner in many of the events, with Max Slater in the immediate background and occasionally emerging from it into the foreground, always, it seemed to her, at the moment when she was most willing to have him. In her heart she liked him better than Roy, and trusted him far more; but he did not supply the same excitement, and excitement was the present order of the day for her.

She was well aware that she and Roy Bretton had drawn together magnetically in the last three weeks. His ardent masculinity, as she became more accustomed to it, ceased to repel her, though it still fell short of

rousing very definite response. But there had been established between them a queer unexpressed understanding. Just as some telepathic interchanges are psychical, so others are physical; the expectancy between Rollo and Roy was of that order; it had become all but a covenant. Now, sitting in her dark room, Rollo knew that the climax was at hand, if she would let it be—indeed, unless she actually thwarted it or some outside agency intervened. And—she did not care! Let come what might come.

The three-o'clock-in-the-morning event was of Roy's own devising. He had announced it as "under a special pre-Mardi Gras license," at the fancy dress dance of the night before, where, dressed in demoniac costume as Royal Revel-Devil, he had instituted a midnight game of forfeits, first exacting a solemn promise from each participant that he or she would scrupulously obey the directions and penalties as apportioned. As Wally Dangerfield's strongest champagne punch had been kept going the whole evening, there was no cavil at this. The head of the ceremonies announced the program of penalties to be begun at the signal.

"All participants," proclaimed the Royal Revel-Devil with basso profundo rhetoric, "will retire to their rooms not later than 2 A. M. for an hour's meditation upon their past sins and anticipation of their future ones. When the individual call comes it will be unmistakable for each. Obey it implicitly. Follow the indicated line without misgiving, without inquiry, without striving to see the dark paths of fate, the guiding line which has neither check nor knot, deviation nor interruption, until it shall bring you safe to the appointed

goal. At breakfast all will report and narrate their adventures in the best Arabian Nights style—if they dare. Fear not; faint not; fail not. Selah! I have spoken."

Keyed to the highest pitch, Rollo now waited, but in vain. The clock below had chimed the quarter hour after, and now the half hour sounded. Had she been forgotten? Had she missed a signal? Could something have gone amiss? She crept to her door to listen.

The night seemed, to her excited imagination, full of vague, significant rustlings, muffled steps leading to strange rendezvous, voiceless whispers. Once she plainly heard footfalls, approaching, diminishing. Her fervent fancy pictured scenes, encounters, recognitions, and shrank even as it magnified those picturings. Or was it all imaginary; one of those practical jokes for which the Dangerfield ménage was famous? Roy, himself, had a reputation as an inveterate and ingenious joker. Were the others, like herself, waiting in a fever of expectation for something that would never happen, only to meet the light derision of the perpetrators in the morning? No! Convincingly the solution came to her; she was to be the last because Roy, as master of ceremonies, must dispose of all the others before he could claim her.

A gentle noise interrupted her thoughts; her window was being thrust down slowly from the top. Some small object fell lightly to the floor. She crossed and picked it up; a card attached to a strong, corded twine. By the flashlight on her dresser she read the printed legend:

"Follow the cord."

Yes; she would follow. Wherever it led; to whatever dénouement. Her being was flooded by a new sensation, exultation; not passion certainly, as she vaguely guessed that passion might be, but a wild sense of adventure, of culmination, of challenge to the unknown in the certainty that she was impervious to hurt, because nothing mattered. Raising the window from the bottom, she stepped out into the pit-murk of the night, following the string along the balcony until it led her, by another window, into what she guessed to be the hallway. The faintest of phosphorescence indicated the stairs. She went down slowly, soft-footed as a cat, following blindly the blind guidance.

On the mid-landing she stopped short. Voices in the alcove beyond, murmurous, subdued; then a soft passion of laughter that choked her blood and shook the heart beneath her breast. She caught at the balustrade and crept on.

Now she was on the ground floor. From the outer darkness rose and spread a distant glare upon the sky, the discharge of the far-away blast furnace at Merthyr, picking out the oblong of a window and against it two figures, close clasped, swaying before her vision. . . . Milly Wild's slow, broken whisper:

"Don't, Tom! Don't kiss me again—not that way. I—I can't stand it!"

An exclamation of fright followed, for she had moved the door in crouching backward. "Who's that? There's someone there." . . . She hurried on, dropping the guide-line, creeping along close to the wall.

What now? She must find the cord again, or return. Going to her knees, she crawled and fumbled until the

twisted line met her fingers again. Rising, she went forward, trailing the guide betwixt her fingers, then checked herself in startled surprise. A loose-ended knot had slipped into her hand. What might that mean? Her stimulated senses played about the question. "Neither check nor knot, deviation nor interruption"; she remembered Roy Bretton's exact words. And here, in contradiction to them——

A door slammed harshly. There was a stumbling rush, an oath, a bump, a hiccupping cough. Somebody had trusted too implicitly in Wally Dangerfield's warranty of the "harmless" character of the punch. The unknown was lurching toward her now, muttering some incoherent summons. Warren Graves! For he had asked the darkness who was there and answered himself, uncertainly, "Pat. Li'l Pattie." Darting into a side passage she cringed back into a portièred shelter and heard him blundering like a befuddled rhinoceros toward the stairs. More voices, a man's and a woman's; in the room behind her—and she could not help but hear, being afraid to risk going back to the main hallway. At almost the first words she recognized the speakers as Jessamine Beaumont and her returned husband. How like Roy Bretton's robust and mordant humor to have brought them together thus after the long separation, for the climax of a Mardi Gras comedy. Beaumont's clear voice was tense as he said:

"This is a warm welcome after four months."

"What did you expect to find?"

"A wife."

"There are other men's wives here; plenty of them."

"And other women's husbands."

"You needn't tell me that, having left me to find it out for myself," she returned with deadly quiet.

"So-o! That's the popular game! Which one is it?"

"What right have you to ask?"

"I'm still your husband legally."

"And I'm still your wife—legally."

"Who's your lover?"

"How do you know I have any? How do you know I haven't a dozen?"

"By God; I'll find out!"

"That's your privilege, if you can."

"What's hardened you this way, Jazz?" There was a hurt, an almost childish puzzlement in his query. "I don't get you at all."

At that her restrained passion broke through to a level of speech more savage, more embittered than the shrillest vituperation of a termagant. "No; you don't get me. I'll explain myself to you, husband of mine! I'll tell you why I'm hard. Because you married me, a girl of twenty who knew nothing—*nothing*—and awoke me to life and knowledge and new cravings and demands, and then, when you had temporarily had enough of me, you went away and left me in the serene faith that everything you'd awakened in me would go to sleep again and wait until you came back; that I'd keep 'straight' because I was your wife. One of the sailors' wives that Dorrisdale is full of. Ask them if there aren't Snug Harbors for sailors' wives as well as for sailors. Faithful or unfaithful, what right have you got to call me to account, my absentee husband? *I'll* let you guess yourself to death—and so good night to you."

Breathless, with mind stunned, Rollo fled. So that was marriage; that was what it did to a girl. Suppose Roy should want to marry her afterward—as he had shown serious signs of doing? There was a quick reversal of her adventurous spirit; unexpectedly it turned toward Max Slater; if it were a question of marrying, where trust and confidence and affection were involved— But that was all out of the question for her; she hadn't the time even to be any man's wife. How could she have forgotten, for the briefest moment? So much the safer; so much the better. She laughed softly.

On through the darkness she moved, resolute now. The cord, which had almost fallen from her relaxed hold, was streaming between her fingers. She passed a doorway; a cool draft brought to her a whiff of sensuous odor that stung her nerves. The conservatory, that was; but the string conducted her past it. She guessed now whither she was being led; a tiny, single-windowed cloakroom at the end of the passage. There whatever might be was awaiting her.

The door was ajar, the string passing through the slight aperture. She pushed it boldly, passed through, closed it behind her with an irrevocable gesture, and stood, intensely conscious in the surcharged silence, of another presence in the room. In a small, laughing, valiant voice she said:

"Lafayette, we are here."

CHAPTER XIII

It was not Roy Bretton; so much her acute inner feminine sense told her before the still sharer of the dark and the silence had spoken a word. Roy would have instantly taken this for his long-delayed, long-thwarted opportunity; have had her in his arms before now; have been pressing down his hot, wordless kisses upon her lips—and she would have hated it, fought against him, gone to any extreme to repulse and escape him. In a flash of total subversion of feeling she realized this without clearly understanding the reason If she had been obliged to put it into words, she would have said that for some occult and sudden reason this was not Roy's time; not for her. One side of her brain stood amazed at the inconsistent and reluctant femininity thus displayed; the other was excitedly speculating on the immediate situation.

A long, slow breath was drawn in the darkness. But the unseen presence did not speak. Said she, with rallying gayety:

"The proper answer, when I say 'Lafayette, we are here' is, 'Won't you—sit down?' "

"Rollo."

Of course! She might have known that it would be Max Slater. But how——

"Did you cut the string?" The solution had come up out of that part of her brain which had now begun

to recover from its surprise at her change of mental—yes, and physical attitude.

"Yes. Are you angry at me? Not that it matters if you are."

"For what?"

"For not being Bretton."

"No. I'm glad it's you instead of Roy," she replied impulsively, and realized that this was the literal truth with all its startling implications.

Max Slater said slowly and ominously: "You damned little fool!"

"Why?"

"You'd have gone to him if I hadn't gypped the string. Wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

"And do you know where he was waiting for you? In a room in the vacant garage. A bedroom."

"Was he?" she returned nonchalantly.

"You knew it all the time," he whispered violently. "Then you are in love with him. *Are* you?"

"How can I tell?" she teased.

"And you're using me as a refuge—temporary, probably," he pursued, illogically if not unfairly, considering the manner of her being there. "Would you marry Bretton?"

"He never asked me," she replied demurely, and added: "I don't care *too* much about your cross-examination manners, Max."

"I can't believe you understood what you were doing," he said piteously. "I don't believe you knew what it would have meant for you to go to him there."

"I knew perfectly. I understood everything about

it—except myself—and why I'm here—and you. Particularly you. What made you change the string, Max?"

"To save you."

"That's only a partial answer. What's the rest?"

"Do you want me to tell you?"

"I think it's distinctly up to you to tell me, after butting in on my very private affairs as you have."

"Then I won't," he retorted with sullen, unexpected obstinacy.

The girl's hand groped and clutched his wrist as an uncertain thud of feet sounded outside. "There's that homeless and bedless wanderer again. Does this door bolt?"

"No."

"Then we can't talk here. Take me away somewhere."

"Where?"

"My room wouldn't do," she reflected. "We'd be overheard, and while everything goes in this house tonight apparently, I want to talk this out with you where we won't be interrupted. Where does this window lead?"

"To the courtyard."

"Find me an overcoat and some goloshes and take me home with you."

"*Home!* To my house?"

"Why not? Are you afraid?" she mocked gently.

"Yes."

"Of being compromised?"

"Of—of myself." From her contact with the arm

under her hand she could feel that his whole powerful frame was trembling.

"I'm not afraid of you."

"I love you, Rollo."

"Ought that to make me afraid?"

"Yes."

"It doesn't. I trust you, Max."

"For God's sake, don't," he groaned. "No; forget I said that."

The footsteps outside drew nearer. There was a mumble of plaintive and protesting interrogation. "Mary's little lamb seems to have lost Mary," chuckled Rollo close to her companion's unseen ear, as he folded her in a long coat and fitted overshoes to her feet. Cautiously he raised the window and reconnoitered; the coast was clear. He dropped to the ground and caught her in his arms as she followed. Through the blackness they blundered, silently and hand in hand, bringing up at the far garage where his car stood. The doors were open; evidently part of the revels had taken to the open country on wheels. He helped her into the car and got in beside her.

"Home, James," she directed loftily.

There was no response in him to her determined playfulness. "You've known right along that I loved you, haven't you, Rollo?"

"Yes."

"And that I've no right to tell you so."

"I give you the right," she retorted soberly.

"Nobody can give me the right," was his despairing reply.

"You're singularly conventional, for Dorrisdale.

The fact that you are more or less married, or have been——"

"It isn't wholly a question of my marriage. You don't understand."

"Make me, then."

"I can't."

"Is it another woman?"

"No," he answered explosively.

"I knew it wasn't," was her composed reply. "But I'm trying to clear the air. You don't help much. Does anybody know your dark and bloody secret?"

"Only one man."

"Then it isn't a secret. And you won't tell me?" she wheedled. "Surely it isn't something that you're ashamed of."

"If it were, I'd tell you." She pressed to him for a moment, warmed by that clear and unconscious exposition of character. "As it is, I'd be ashamed if I did tell it."

"Then it's somebody else's secret," she persisted.

"No. Entirely my own. Oh, Rollo!" he burst out. "I can't whimper—to you."

As the dispelling glare of the blast furnace, earlier in the night, had lighted up the world for one betraying moment, so now upon the girl's supersensitized consciousness the upsurge of memory cast a blaze of indubitable intuition.

This was the man of whom Dorr Manning had spoken! The man who, in worse case than she herself, was yet carrying on, finishing what he could of his job, too strong to whine, too game to quit, though death was hanging over him.

She said tremulously: "You needn't tell me. I know."

"Rot! How could you know?"

"Dorr Manning told me."

"I don't believe it," he cried so violently that any shadow of remaining doubt was swept away.

She gathered herself and forced a little laugh: "In other words, 'You lie.' Is that it?"

"I'd sooner believe you lied than that he would give me away."

"He didn't! He didn't! You're devoted to Dorr, aren't you?" she continued eagerly.

"He's the only person in the world that I thought I could fully trust. How did you worm it out of him?"

She sat up, stung. "It wasn't anybody's fault. Just a pure accident. Something he said fitted in with something you've just said, and the connection came to me in a flash—by wireless, it might have been! He never even hinted at who you were. It was a million to one against my guessing."

"Well, you've guessed," said he grimly. "How much do you know?"

"Almost nothing. No more than that there's some terrible chance——"

"Not chance. Certainty," he broke in briefly.

"Max, dear; won't you tell me? You can trust me. Can't you?"

"It's getting late, and cold," was the uncompromising response.

But again she felt the trembling of the arm next hers, and this time was herself shaken by that irrepressible emotion in one of such stringent self-control.

Her mind, winging back to the fateful talk with Dorr Manning, borrowed from it strength for the resolution which she had now fully taken, determined to leave nothing to the drifting currents of chance. Dorr had told her that she could not take without giving; that it was not in her nature. Her escape from the reckless abandon of an affair with Roy Bretton whose appeal for her was purely physical, and her own revulsion of feeling, confirmed the prophecy. But with Maxwell Slater it was far different. All those deep-founded feminine instincts to bestow, to yield, even to sacrifice for the happiness of another, which lie at the very roots of the woman-nature, were enlisted in her purpose. Yes; she would give, generously, lavishly; pour out largesse of her youth, her beauty, the warmth and sweetness of her glowing vitality, for this man in whom she felt so much of strength and fineness, of loyalty and courage. What better course for her, moving fast to her own tragedy, than to give to his love what brief happiness and splendor it could claim before the end? But, how to make him to accept what she stood ready to give?

"Aren't you going to start the car, Max?"

"To go where?" was the obstinate rejoinder.

"I've told you already. Must I beg for your hospitality?"

With palpable effort he said: "I wish I could see your face."

"Aren't there electric lights in your house?"

"Oh, *well!*" The car scrunched out across the packed snow of the driveway. "This commits you to nothing, though," he muttered.

Within herself she thought: "To everything." But there was a faint, affectionate derisiveness in her reply: "You mean, it commits *you* to nothing. How discreet you are, Max!"

She leaned back from him, thinking quietly. She could think now, without confusion, without fear, without misgiving, and her thoughts went, in wonder, back to her escape from the other and baser attraction. True, in her drawing toward Max there was less of the rebellious, subphysical urge, prurience rather than passion (she could deal clearly with ugly words now), which had turned her toward Roy and then away again in revolt. That had had, within its possibilities, "all of those rotten things that begin with L," as one of the Wild girls had once picturesquely said. Not this. Here, at least, there was admiration, respect, trust, and her own warm desire to be to her lover all that a life which she guessed—and rightly—to have been rather austere, in spite of his associations, had thus far denied him. With detached amusement she reflected: "I'm thinking of this exactly as if we were going to be married"; and, immediately, in rebuttal: "Why shouldn't it have the dignity and fineness of a marriage? I'd marry him if it were possible, and fair to him." Certainly it was as decent as many of the marriages which she saw around her, and infinitely more so than those furtive and fitful affairs to which the sailors' wives of Dorrisdale lent themselves with social impunity.

His bungalow loomed, vague and chill, before them as he switched off the lights of the car, turning into the

driveway. He led her to and left her at the side door.

"Wait there," he directed.

Within, a light flashed on; she could hear Max rummaging about the dining room. When he returned it was with a closed hand upheld, which he opened before her, letting something sift down upon the doorsill, invisible in the dimness.

"What was that?"

"Salt."

"Some kind of private rite?"

"Not my own. I got it from a mountain tribe I once lived with in the Pyrenees."

"Meaning hospitality? Or what?"

"In a way. It pledges honor that whoever crosses it may go out as they came in, safely and at will."

"What has the scientific mind to do with such a superstition?" she taunted.

"I'm not feeling specially scientific tonight; and this is a good deal more than a superstition to me. It's a pledge."

"Who asked for a pledge?" she retorted lightly. "May I come in now?"

"Come. But step clear of the sill."

Half boldly, half furtively she set her foot upon the salt-strewn threshold, not daring to look and see whether he had noted her symbolic disobedience. He led her to the living room and set to building a fire in the broad fireplace, while she huddled against the chill, among the cushions of a divan facing it. As soon as the blaze illumined the room he switched off the electric lights, bent and kissed her hand which hung loosely over the end of the divan, and took his stand

at the corner of the mantel, where she could see only dimly his absorbed and thoughtful profile. By some subtle sympathy she knew that he had put on his habitual iron self-control, like a coat of impervious mail. But was it impervious? Even while she admired, she resented this attitude in him. She discarded hat and coat and snuggled back in her warmed corner, her hands clasped above her head, her regard steady upon his troubled face.

"I don't know how to begin," he said at length.

She elected to give a lighter tone to the talk; it would make it easier for him. "They usually begin with a confession in the movies, don't they? The stage is set for it: Scene; rich young bachelor's apartment at midnight or later. You've got the right expression for the start. Now register resolution, remorse, gloom—I don't know why I'm chattering in this imbecile way," she added, as his face failed to light up in response. "Whistling to keep up my courage, I expect."

"You've got nothing to fear here, Rollo. Don't you understand that?"

Illogically she was sharply exasperated by this. "I'm more likely to be bored than scared. You're not very thrilling company tonight, Max."

"Because I'm floundering in my mind. I'm so afraid of your misunderstanding. Rollo, you *do* understand that I love you and want you beyond anything in the world. Don't you?"

She chose to be petulant. "I don't know whether I do or not. I thought I did, but from the way you're acting, I'm not sure at *all*."

His form loomed so huge, as it shot out of the semi-

darkness where he had stood, that it seemed to shut out all the light in the universe from her startled eyes. He was on his knees beside her now, his arms encircling her, his breath hotly tremulous on her cheek. She heard his fierce mutter: "That's more than I'll take from you," and thought to herself, with terror and triumph, "Well, you asked for it!" knowing that she had broken through his self-restraint for once. With a dumb yielding she turned her lips to his. But at his kiss there loomed a far bright memory. . . .

Another kiss, back across the crowded and eventful months; the only one that had ever passed between her and Dorr Manning; casual, unpremeditated, playful, such a kiss as two children might give, the one to the other, after a happy day together; yet she could see, with the vivid clarity of the resurrected past, the change and pallor of Dorr's face, and feel again the start—was it fear, or surprise, or instinctive defense? —that had quickened her veins?

With no volition of refusal she could not help stiffening in Max's embrace, her lips chilling against his. She cursed herself for her reluctance, her cowardice, she who had been in her own soul so valiant in surrender, so regally generous toward her intended lover. With a self-contemptuous revolt, she forced her arms to clasp him, draw him close, only to feel him tear himself away with a groan. Then he was back at his corner of the mantel, facing her direct now.

"Do you know why I don't ask you to marry me, Rollo?"

"Because you've got a perfectly good and legal wife on your hands."

He jerked his hand, dismissing that. "I could be free of her in time. It isn't that."

"I haven't asked or expected you to marry me, have I?" she murmured.

"Well, then," he resumed impatiently, "why I haven't taken you at your word, loving you as I do."

"Some idea of chivalry, perhaps. Is that it?"

"Oh, we needn't deal in high-sounding words. I'm sailing for Europe next Thursday."

She sat up, startled. "Europe? Thursday? . . . Well; Thursday is Thursday—four days away."

"Don't you understand that I couldn't force myself to go if we became lovers? Good God! It's hard enough as it is to think of leaving you."

"You could go later."

"There isn't enough 'later' left for me to take any chances with."

"*Max!*" There was terror and appeal in her tone. "It isn't as—as near as that!"

"Let's not have any sob-stuff." Face and voice were alike hard. "Nobody can say absolutely how near it is; but that very uncertainty means hurry up and get the job done that I've got on my conscience."

"But what is this terrible thing? I don't understand."

"Oh, some of the funny little rays that I've been monkeying with have turned and stung me; that's all. Internally, you know. The details aren't interesting."

"Do you—suffer much?" she asked in a lifeless voice.

"There are times when it isn't too pleasant. But that isn't the point. The point is a special problem that I've got to work out with Mme. Curie; that's what's

taking me across while I've got time, and if I get that done or get her started so she can complete it, it doesn't so much matter whether I come back."

"Ah, yes," she murmured. "Come back."

"That's pity. I don't want that."

"It's more than pity. It isn't what you're giving me, but——"

"You needn't tell me that: I knew it finally when you were in my arms. If it were," he concluded savagely, "I'd never stir. I'd let the whole thing go to hell to have you."

She denied him with a little shake of her bright head. "No, you wouldn't. It wouldn't be you if you did. It wouldn't be the Max that I could give myself to. It wouldn't be a gift at all," she added with sad clarity. "It would be cheating. And we couldn't cheat, you and I. No: you've got to go and finish your job and come back—to me."

"But you understand now—don't you?" he besought.

"Yes."

"Rollo, would you marry me, if I did come back?" he asked hesitantly.

She stared into the failing fire. Why not? What did it matter? She would have to tell him—or perhaps not, for his doom might come first. And she could not now refuse him any hope. "If you want me to," she said. "Anything you want, Max."

"You're sure there isn't anyone else?"

"Perfectly sure." (But why should there have been that heart-beat of hesitancy—which he had not noticed?)

"I've thought," he resumed slowly, "that Dorr was in love with you and that you might care for him."

"Dorr Manning? What on earth made you think that? Can you imagine anything more sobbing than me as the wife of a semiclergyman?"

"When he found I was coming to the party he asked me to—to—the effect was that he'd feel better if I was on hand in case you needed someone you could fall back on. Quaint idea, yes?"

"I think it was raw impertinence," she flashed.

"No; that wasn't the notion at all. Dorr certainly had you on his mind."

"What if he could see us here?" she suggested wickedly.

"He wouldn't think anything wrong," was the simple reply. "He doesn't think that way."

"Not if he'd seen us a minute ago?"

A black shadow descended over Max's face. "I'm a damned rotten sort of friend, I'll say!"

"You shan't say it. I won't let you. We owe Dorr nothing. And anyway, if there had been anything, I'm the rotter, if anyone. And I'm not; I don't feel a rotter at all. The only thing I'm ashamed of is—" She broke off, unable to speak to him of that instinctive withdrawal. "Anyway, I fail to see Dorr's name in Class A of the American Stonethrowers' Championship. He's chasing Careth Lindsay, isn't he?"

"That's a dangerous woman," remarked Max. "A very dangerous woman. Just what Dorr needs. He's a little in danger of growing inhuman, pharisaical. He needs some livening experience to get him back on earth."

"How I hate that cynical assumption," she flashed at him, "that a man needs and has a right to that kind of indulgence, any more than a girl. You don't criticize the man: you even think he's a little abnormal if he doesn't play that game. But if the girl does, she's a 'bad woman.' Isn't there such a thing as being a 'bad man'?"

He smiled a little at her vehemence. "There speaks the insurgent grandfather."

"I suppose so. Are you encouraging Dorr in his affair with Careth Lindsay?"

"You mustn't assume that it's an affair, in that sense. I haven't any idea that it is."

"Yet she, within her discreet limits, is what you call a bad woman, isn't she?"

"Not what *I* call a bad woman, certainly. She's an unhappy woman. And not through any fault of her own."

"Maybe it's being unhappy that makes women bad."

Something in the brooding words struck deep into him. He walked over and stood looking down at the aching beauty of her face, now shadowed, now sharp in the fire-flicker.

"Sometimes I've thought that you're an unhappy woman, Rollo."

"But I'm not bad: is that what you mean? You couldn't get anybody to believe that on a bet, after tonight."

"Are you unhappy?" he persisted.

"I'm not too happy. Who is? I'm little enough so to want to add something to the sum total of happiness in the world—if you'll let me, Max." It was said

almost humbly. "Promise me you'll come back and let me, Max," she pleaded.

"I have a feeling now that I'll come back; now that I've got so much to come back for. But I have another feeling—a queer one—that you may not be here for me to come back to. What does that mean? I believe you could tell me if you would. It's part of the mystery of—of your being willing to come here with me tonight, I believe."

At once she turned defensively obstinate. "No; there's nothing to tell," she lied. To one other soul, Dorr Manning, she had told, in an unforgettable, unequaled racking of the spirit; never could she tell anyone else unless—well (she thought again), if she became Max's wife, perhaps. Or perhaps the very impossibility of telling was proof that she never could wholly surrender herself to him.

At that thought her first resolution returned upon her, fiercely definite now. She *would* go through with it, not wait for a culmination which death might so probably frustrate. But it was of Max more than of herself that she was thinking now. He should not die without knowing what happiness she had it in her power to bestow on him.

Dreamily, lingeringly, with calculated provocation she uttered her invocation to the pagan gods, through Max who was to be their instrument. "Here we are, we two. Alone on a desert island. Shut off from the rest of the world, with the unfathomable sea of secrecy all around us. In the dead of night. Dead nights tell no tales, Max. Let's pretend this is a blank day in the

calendar; a February 30th, a day with no past and no future; only a present."

"There aren't any such days."

"Ah, don't be literal, *now!* There could be, if we make it so."

"Now you're back to where I don't understand you."

"Because you won't. Do you need to understand me—if you love me?"

"Love you! Oh, my God, Rollo! Until I met you I thought I'd done with all that; that I'd reduced love to its simplest terms of a physical craving, something I could conquer and have done with and despise. But I want so much more of you than just that. It isn't good enough, my dear, my darling. I'm not going to sacrifice you to myself."

"What right have you to say it would be sacrifice?"

"How could it be anything else, for a man hanging by his fingertips to the edge of life, even if there weren't the other consideration of the possible result to you? So that's that," he said gravely, and rose from the floor at her feet where he had dropped.

"Does that mean I have to go?"

"It's getting on toward four."

"Three hours to dawn, isn't it? I'd love to see the first light—with you." She lowered her voice. "What if I refuse to go? Will you turn me out in the cold, across the salt of hospitality?"

"*Rollo!*" She knew that he was trembling. "I can't. I mustn't," she heard him dimly mutter.

"Why 'mustn't'?" Was it, indeed, she herself speaking so calmly, so naturally?

He was trying to answer, stammering like a boy. "Because—because——"

"Suppose there weren't any because between us?"

"There is. There is," he cried painfully. "The strongest kind."

"My 'innocence,' I suppose. Max, can't you stop thinking of me as a callow girl," she pleaded, "and understand that I'm a woman who has been taught to think those things out for herself?"

He was still obstinate. "No girl can think them out for herself. She hasn't the—the point of view. . . . And I'm not a rotter, Rollo."

"All right, then. Suppose I'd been married, secretly."

He was thunderstruck. "Married! You haven't!" But his very tone had changed; there had crept into it a note of the hopeful, the expectant.

"Would it make so much difference? It seems to me that your scruples are highly technical," she returned with a touch of scorn. "Apparently if I had been married, my marriage vows would mean nothing to you. But a girl with no vows to break, with no bond of honor involved, even if she came to you with her eyes open and of her own free will—she's protected by her inexperience. If that is it, I certainly prefer Grandfather's standards to yours."

"Have you been married, Rollo?" he insisted.

"Not married," she pronounced deliberately. "That was just a test. But—oh, Max, *do* I have to draw a diagram for you?"

"I don't believe it," he snarled, and she thrilled to his instinctive, illogical faith in her. The next instant

she laughed in disillusionment, for— "Not Bretton?" he said fiercely.

"Oh, no! Nobody you ever heard of."

"You must have loved him very much," said he with painful wistfulness.

Once thus embarked, she continued to improvise with a fictional ease of which she was quite proud. "Not enough to—to let it go on long. And not nearly enough to marry him. Not as much as I care for you, Max." Would he notice that she had not used the conclusive word "love" to him? There are women who can yield, clear-eyed and unshrinking, all that passion may claim and still withhold the final surrender of avowal in a strange and remote virginity of the soul, to be abandoned only to the lover who can master soul as well as body.

"I love you so!" he said brokenly. And she knew that the victory was hers.

Crossing again the threshold at earliest dawn, she bent far down in her girlish suppleness and with light, sweet breath, blew the scattered grains of salt away.

"That's for return," she whispered to her lover.

CHAPTER XIV

In the unlikely case of their being seen on the return trip the theory agreed upon between them was that they had been motoring all night. Like excuses on the part of others, true or fictitious, were sure to be presented, and to be accepted in the tolerantly cynical spirit of the Dangerfield atmosphere. All the way back Max was silent and preoccupied, though his face when it turned to her was alight with such an abandonment of adoration that it startled and troubled her. If only she could respond to it in its degree!

Unknown to Rollo, Max was deeply disturbed by an untoward occurrence. As they had stepped into his car at the bungalow door, in the pink-and-gray hardness of the first dawn, he had seen in a window opposite the thunderstruck face of a neighbor, who sometimes rose for an early train. The best he could hope for was that Rollo's uncouth garmenting and muffled features had made her unrecognizable.

At the dim side-entrance to the "Private Athletic Club" she raised her face to kiss him. "Good night, Max dear. We got away with it undiscovered, didn't we?"

He held her to him for a moment. "I wish I could make you know how I love you, Rollo," said he wistfully.

"Do you? As much as—before?"

"A thousand times more."

"I thought—never mind what I thought. Girls talk such rot about those things to each other. See you at breakfast."

That breakfast was a wild noon function, beginning with cocktails and continuing with champagne "to loosen up the narrative inhibitions" as Roy Bretton announced. His eyes were hot and sullen and balked, whenever Rollo met them, and she wondered, as a matter of saturnine romantic interest, to what malapropos encounter Max's juggling of the strings of fate had guided him. It wouldn't much matter, though; all would be fish that came to his net in the way of amorous adventure, she guessed.

The rest of the table offered a not less curious study. There was a prevalent atmosphere of determined insouciance. Some of the autobiographical reports, when Bretton called for them, evinced a really meritorious imaginative quality; others were bald and unconvincing. But Rollo, whose nocturnal course had so skirted the coasts of passion, tragedy, and chance, observed with an eye that pierced beneath the facial surfaces: she noted the haggard uncertainty of Sam Beaumont's wandering looks which settled too often for perfect good form upon his laughing, clear-eyed wife; the irrepressible glances, half furtive, half proprietary, with which Emmy Adair enveloped the proudly conscious Wally Dangerfield. ("*Why* must they both look as if they'd eaten the canary?" thought Rollo, amused and disgusted at once.) And with a vague sympathy she thought to detect in Milly Wild's sensuous and heavy-lidded eyes an unaccustomed bravado—and dreams—and dim forebodings.

Breakfast over, there was the inevitable tendency toward disintegration of the party into pairs. At best but a sorry tactician, Max manœuvred too clumsily to forestall the adroit Bretton. But, to the girl's surprise and amusement, he recovered his ground by practically shouldering the wrathful rival out of his way.

"Rollo and I," he stated calmly, "are dated up for a long, and I may add, a lonely walk."

For a moment she feared trouble, for Bretton was himself accustomed to the high-handed method, and was quick tempered into the bargain. But Max had a reputation for physical solidity that made the other pause —and in the pause Rollo, she hardly knew how, was whisked off.

"Now," she thought, "he'll probably take the rôle of the masterful male because of what's happened, and then there *will* be trouble!" And her small, firm jaw set, for in yielding herself she had yielded no proprietary rights over herself.

Not at all. All his combativeness was gone when he turned to her, after they had rounded the corner. "Was I too brash?" he asked. "Did you want me to let you alone for a time?"

She kissed his cheek lightly and swiftly. "Is that good enough, for an answer?"

"Rollo," he said very gently, "why did you lie to me last night?"

A strong quiver of surprise, almost of dismay, passed through her. She had not expected that question. Or, if she had been half prepared for it at one time, she had supposed that it would have come earlier if at all. No

need for her to ask, "What about?" nor would she evade or palter.

"How did you know I lied?" she asked.

"How could I help but know?"

"I hoped you mightn't. I—I didn't want you to."

"Why did you do it?" he persisted somberly.

"If I hadn't pretended you'd have made me go home. Wouldn't you?"

"God knows! I think so. I think I'd have been man enough."

"I know you would," she confirmed. "I know you, Max."

"But you don't know how terribly I love you—and wanted you. You couldn't know."

"But I did. That's why I stayed."

"Was that the only reason?"

"No."

"I wish I could be sure you're not lying to me again. I told you I didn't want a sacrifice."

She divined his suffering. "It wasn't a sacrifice; indeedfi it wasn't, Max. You mustn't have me on your conscience. It's a funny old conscience, my dear."

"How, funny? I suppose it's like any other fellow's conscience."

"I suppose it is." Her smile was profound, enigmatic, tolerant, with a disturbing implication of being almost pitying. "It's an awfully manny sort of conscience, isn't it? Does the twist in it ever bother you? Or didn't you know you had a twist in it?"

He shook his head. "Something hurts. Or it will, like hell, when I'm away from you; I haven't got room

for anything but happiness when I'm with you. But it isn't a twist."

"Indeed it is. Max, I'm going to be very severe, and sapient and analytical——"

"And adorable, and bewitching and Rollo-ish."

"Don't interrupt the professor when about to profess. This is serious." But the swift side glance she gave him was fond. "As long as you believed that I was what is usually called pure, you were firmly resolved to send me away, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"But when I'd convinced you that I was impure——"

He thrust his hand roughly over her lips. "*Rollo!* You know I never thought of you that way. I couldn't."

"But I had to be one thing or the other, didn't I," she pressed him relentlessly, "according to your man's creed?"

"No. It isn't that. That isn't a fair way to put it."

"Well, *you* put it fairly, then."

"I thought if—well, if you'd had experience," he stammered—"if you understood, knew what you were doing, you know——"

"If I'd had one lover, I might as well have two," she sardonically helped him out.

"That isn't it at all," he disclaimed miserably.

"Isn't it? It seems to be the way you figured it, though. If I'd belonged to another man, even by marriage, then it was all right. That's the way an honorable man looks at these things, isn't it?"

"No. I don't know. I only know it doesn't seem to have any meaning when you apply it to us."

"Because you're in love with me at present. But if

it were another girl and another man? Isn't that the normal masculine point of view, Max, as I've put it?"

"I—I suppose it is."

"It's queer." She laughed softly, mirthlessly. "If a thief is caught stealing a second time, they send him to jail for a longer term, don't they?"

"Yes."

"And if a murderer goes on murdering—but he's not supposed to get a second chance, is he? But, anyway, you get the point, don't you? I wonder why it is that this particular sin should be the only one where the second offense isn't as bad as the first. You're so wise about so many things, Max; can't you tell me?"

"I love you," he muttered, doggedly and passionately.

"You're dodging," she charged, but her intonation had softened and the light in her eyes was tender. "Ah, well; perhaps that's the best answer, after all."

And then he spoiled it by groaning: "What I hate myself for is not knowing, in spite of anything you said beforehand, that you were straight. I'd give anything in the world—my life, if it meant anything—to have yesterday back again."

Her face darkened. "So would I. That is, if you feel that way. You couldn't feel that way unless you thought of me as degraded by what's happened. Is that the way you're thinking of me, Max? Or are you saying that just to appease your conscience?"

"My God, *no!* Are you trying to torture me, Rollo?"

"I take it back," she said quickly. "It isn't a mean, tricky conscience, even if it is queer in spots. Max, dear, look me in the eye and dare to tell me that you regard me as a 'ruined' woman."

"Now you're trying to clear my conscience," said he astutely.

"And that *is* clever of you. But do you?"

"No. Of course not," he cried indignantly. "Just the same, I hold myself responsible for what has happened."

"And that's cant," she said disdainfully. "Words. Highly honorable words, of course, but still words. You and I don't have to worry over words, do we, Max?"

"There are also facts which involve responsibility—sometimes," said he significantly. "I'm not sailing on Thursday."

Upon that her face changed and clouded. "Don't make me sorry, Max. That's the only thing that could make me sorry, to have you go back on yourself, even for me."

"But leaving you now would be going back on you."

"More words."

"Do you want me to go, Rollo?"

"For yourself, yes; for myself, no. Go and come back to me."

The flame shot up through him and out from his eyes. "Then you do love me, at least a little," he said passionately. "You didn't say it to me, even last night. (So he had noticed!) Can't you say it, Rollo?"

Could she? She so wanted to. But there was a bar across her soul. No; not that inner fortress. Not even for Max, who might never come back to her. "I can't be anything but honest with you, Max dear, about this. It isn't what I wish it was for your sake—for both of our sakes; what Pat Scott calls 'the 'cello

thrill.' I don't even know that I've got it in me to feel that."

"But—but I don't understand yet why you stayed."

To have answered him, as well she might, that womanly, she was serving her instinct to comfort his aching want of her, would have left him uncomprehending and perhaps hurt. She said only:

"I'm glad I did, Max. And I wish I could be desperately, passionately, absolutely in love with you."

"As you thought you were with Bretton," he muttered dangerously.

She laughed in quick and scornful disclaimer. "I never thought so. There wasn't any room for self-deception there. That idea was just adventure, rebellion, and—well, exploration."

"And this?" he pressed her.

"Different. Absolutely. So much so that it makes the other seem cheap and impossible."

"I'll go," he said resolutely and somberly, "Thursday. But it'll be mainly for you now."

She felt her eyes prickling. "And I'll come to you once again before you go—if you want me," she murmured.

"Want you! O God!"

"And there'll be no sprinkling of salt on the sill this time, will there?" she said with playful tenderness.

Had he permitted, she would have gone to New York with him to see him off on the boat. But he would not listen to it. "People would talk so. Besides, do you want to see me break down and blubber?" he demanded fiercely.

So their farewells were said in his bungalow, alone

together. His were informed with the quiet, repressed despair of the brave man who believes himself parting forever with what is alone dear to him in the living world. But Rollo now held to the faith that they would see each other again.

It was with a sort of shamed relief, a sense of restoration to freedom, that she knew him to be on the ocean. She was not accustomed to adjust her life to another's desperate need of her. Now that she could settle down and think, detached from the pressure of his tenderness and passion, she made the discovery that she did not particularly wish to think about this new phase. Indeed, there was nothing to think about. She found herself enveloped in a deep incomprehension. What was it all about? . . . Through it all there was a wondering pride, a great and mothering tenderness toward her lover, that she could mean so much to a life which, in itself, possessed meaning and importance in the wider sense.

Not for a moment did she regret. Max was worth it.

CHAPTER XV

Mileposts. So few there are in life. So very few for Rollo. And she had passed one of those supposed to be determinative, revelatory, divisive, only to find the country on the further side unchanged. She recalled, as a child, having traveled from France into Germany, and her disappointed surprise at the failure to discern any difference in field or forest, in earth or air. That transit had been made in the night. Well . . . the parallel might hold. As if she had fallen asleep in the known land of girlhood and awakened in an expected terra incognita in all respects identical with the country now irrecoverable to her!

A quaint, half gruesome conceit took possession of her mind. She had triumphantly cheated Death of her maidenhood. The unfair fates had promised Death that he should be her first lover, and she had well befooled him by taking Life for her paramour. Life rather than Max (so she thought of it) who had been but the instrumentality of her rebellion. But Life had, in turn, cheated and befooled her. For, in so far as "experience" went, she was left puzzled and wondering. How the little pagan gods, with their on-spurring "for tomorrow ye die!" must be privately laughing at her! She thought blankly: "I don't really know a thing more about life, about love, about womanhood than I did." Was this the grand passion which genius had exalted

and died for? This the crowning experience of mated lovers for which poet and warrior, king and clod had deemed the world well lost? What was there lacking in her that the cast of the fateful dice, the reckless venture of her youth and girlhood had left within her soul only a stark interrogation point?

Time and Max's absence filmed over the memory with unbelievable swiftness. A surface mark upon life —an episode—an interlude. Such a slight thing it seemed in comparison with the greater and tragic change overhanging her, from light to darkness, from the full savor of existence to the body of a living death. Sense of guilt she felt none; but one doubt beset her. Ought she not to have warned her lover, before letting him go, of the impending fate? Had she not betrayed his faith in her by withholding the secret? But why, after all, add burden to his own tragedy? So likely was it that he would not return. If he did not, how much of a blow would that be to her? Candor to herself compelled the realization that it would mean no more to her now than before that night at the bungalow which had altered their relationship—but so little else.

That he was hers to the uttermost, she fully realized. But was she more his than at the beginning of her warm affection and admiration for him? That she had glorified life for him, made him as a god by her surrender, she could not but know. That alone was a sufficient defense against regret. And what had she to regret? As few women had ever been, she was her own mistress, confessing responsibility for her considered actions to none, though, indeed, Dorr Manning's once-confirmed warning of the interdependability of lives did come back

to her more than once. Max's life she had made her own by deliberate choice; but that was, in all probability, as brief as hers would be. To him she gladly admitted her responsibility; if there was any duty left her on earth it was to cherish for him what happiness remained to him through her. What a bitter sacrifice to duty it had been for him to leave her, she could well appreciate, even while she wondered a little at it.

Upon one point she was determined: blind, she would not be his, either by marriage or otherwise. She knew too well how his rigid honor would bind him in either tie. If he lived to return, then she could only hope to postpone the falling darkness, by whatever means it could be achieved, until after that day. So much she owed to his love for her.

But what could she do to hold off the inevitable? She went to Dr. Osterhout about it; what was the most he could give her if she took the best possible care of herself? The grizzled physician shook his head pityingly.

"How can I tell, my dear? It may be in a month; it may not come for a year!"

"Can't I have three months, sure, Bobs, dear? Isn't there anything I can do to—to hoard my eyes?"

"Nothing but to keep in the best possible physical condition. You look it now. You're holding onto yourself gallantly."

"Oh, I break, at times. But not often. And nobody catches me at it."

"Well, keep your nerve. That always helps."

"How will it come, Bobs?"

"Just darkness," he answered sadly.

She tossed her chin up in bravado. "Oh, well! It's

happened to other people before. The streets are full of 'em. Pick out a nice, sunny corner for me and my dog and my little tin cup, will you? . . . Bobs, if you don't stop looking at me like that I'll hug you and *bawl.*"

The time of Max's return had been left ruthlessly indefinite. So much had been agreed upon between them. Whatever time it took, his work must be finished before he might come back to claim her. That was the price to be paid for her love, the risk to be taken. She knew him too well not to realize that he would die in harness, now, if the call came too soon. The best he could hope was to be back in early May.

Rollo modified her life somewhat; stayed at home more. She could better bear to be alone now, having Max to think about. As is so likely to be the case with a woman whose physical attitude toward the man is neutral, absence was his best appeal; she surrounded him with a glamor of romance. It could never be a passion, but it was a devotion. She read on his subjects; she wrote to him by every boat. Once she rose on a sleepless early morning, dressed, and walked down to the empty house that was his, just to look upon it, to intensify her memories of that other early morning when she had awakened there in his arms. As she stood with eyes closed and brooding, a door shut back of her, and steps approached.

"Anything wrong?" asked a man's voice curiously. "Are you sick or anything?"

He was looking at her, not impertinently, certainly, but with interest and what seemed to be surmise.

"Nothing, thank you," she answered. "I'm quite all right."

He hesitated. "I thought— You're Miss Trent, aren't you?"

"Yes. Have I met you before?"

"No. But I've seen your picture in the papers. And I've seen you, too, once. Just about this time and place." He glanced significantly at the closed house.

"I haven't the slightest idea who you are or what you imagine that you saw," she returned haughtily.

Abruptly he said: "You forget it and I'll forget it. That's the best thing for you." He lifted his hat and walked away.

So she and Max had been seen that morning. Her first thought was to write and tell him. But to what good end? It would only worry him, and it couldn't really matter anyway. That was such a very little bridge to be burning behind her compared to future fires.

She was seeing much of the Scotts now, often preferring to stay at home with them—Pat's "social lech," as she called it, having diminished greatly of late—rather than do the party-per-night of the Dorrisdale season. Cary worried her a little; she knew from the troubled surmise, which she occasionally caught when he looked at her, that he was harboring some shrewd suspicion, and she feared the possibility of his gentle, but searching, questions; not as regarded Max, for she would have been willing to avow all that if it had served any good purpose, but as to her overhanging threat. Over the cocktails Pat said to her one evening, several weeks after Max's departure:

"If anything happens to me, Cary'll marry you."

Rollo laughed. "Think she's jealous, Cary?" she inquired.

The husband hunched his shoulders despairingly. "*Dios sabe!* I've given her up long ago as an insoluble problem."

"I'd be jealous as the devil of anybody *but* you, Rol," admitted Pat thoughtfully. "Why is that, I wonder?"

"Because you know I'm too fond of Cary in another way ever to marry him. Besides, nothing's going to happen to you."

"You never can tell in these cases."

"What cases?"

"If it's twins I'll sell you the one that looks least like Cary cheap."

"Joy bells and hallelujah! So *that's* it!"

"It is. Definitely, so Bobs says. He added, just for good measure, that it was about time."

"Aren't you tickled pink?"

"I'm—interested."

"And Cary?"

"Oh, he's jealous. Aren't you, old dear?"

"I'm not perfectly sure whether or not three isn't going to be a crowd."

The words were light, but Rollo caught the underlying misgiving. "Pat will always be more the wife than the mother," she asserted with assurance.

"Which'll you be most of and when are you going to try one or both?" inquired Pat interestedly. "Why —what's up, Rol?" For, without any warning, the girl

had snatched her handkerchief to her eyes and, with a strangled sob, had run from the room.

"Well, *what* would your guardian angel say to *that?*" demanded Pat in utter amazement. "Shall I chase after her?"

"Better let her alone," advised Cary.

"What's the large and calamitous idea, anyway, dearest? She talks more to you than she does to me lately."

"I don't get any light on this performance, though," he muttered.

Upstairs Rollo was despising herself for her weakness. It had rushed upon her, with a cataclysmic fury of revolt, that her cousin should have all this: love, happiness, the color and music of life, and now the stirring adventure of motherhood, while for her there was only the sterile and brief prospect of a waiting which could be nothing more than a respite at best. For one savagely mutinous moment she resolved to cable Max, bidding him forget everything and come back to her. Perhaps he might give her a child. Time might be allowed by the capricious fates for that climax, for that defiance. Cheated of one of life's great experiences, it would be a solace to have the other. For that matter, perhaps already—but in her ignorance she thought it impossible, on second thought. . . . Max would come back to her call. Her mood passed in shame. She forced herself to come down and face them, tear-swollen though she was.

A less tactful pair than the Scotts would have affected to ignore the outbreak, thereby putting stiffen-

ing in the whole remaining evening's intercourse: they were too wise.

"Just for that," stated Pat on her return, "you get an extra kick, in the mixture. Cary, shake up a double-header all around." Which Cary obediently did.

"Make you feel any better about going to the party?" queried Pat solicitously of her cousin after the drink had been duly appreciated. "You've seemed a little soured on it."

The Dorrisdale team had, that afternoon, won the game which clinched the interclub championship, an achievement which had shaken the community to its social foundations, and, pending a more formal celebration later on, a hasty dance and supper had been improvised, to which everyone was expected to go. Five different male informants had called up Rollo to impart the glad tidings, Mr. Roy Bretton being first at the wire.

"Purely as a matter of duty," said Rollo with primly pursed lips, "I am going. Loyalty to the club and all that sorta smoosh."

"How's the Royal Bretton, otherwise known as the Human Pash-Register, behaving his little self these days?" inquired Pat.

"As far as I'm concerned, like the more or less trodden worm."

"You've got him on the ropes. They tell me he shows signs of matrimony."

"After having tried everything else on me! Well, even that wouldn't give me a temperature."

"Still, we have it on good authority that marriage

is an honorable estate; I've forgotten who the authority is."

"Brigham Young, seconded by Bluebeard," offered Cary, helpfully.

"Well, if you must go to the party with Roy, come back with your corsets or in 'em, as the Spartan boy said to his mother, thereby getting back at her with interest," chuckled Pat. "The side door will be open and the beer on the ice."

Once started, though reluctantly, Rollo felt an unwonted elation. She even found enjoyment in fencing with Roy Bretton all the slow way to the club until, thoroughly discomfited, he deposited her on the dancing floor, in the midst of a waiting crowd, and went away to solace himself with drink.

Like the rest of the nation, the Dorrisdale Country Club had fallen under the Bacchic influence of Mr. Volstead's sternly intentioned and blithely ignored law. Ten years earlier the celebration of the hockey championship would have been merely a joyous party, at which many would have been drinking and only a self-selected few drunk. Now, thanks to the natural human tendency to go to extremes of resentment against any too-comprehensive legislative Thou-shalt-not, everybody was drinking and nearly everybody, of the masculine gender at least, was drunk. It was distinctly a "souse party," with Dorr Manning, who was, by way of being the hero of the evening, the shining exception.

He was standing in a doorway, looking on at the whirl, when he caught Carol Trent's eye. She had thrown him a swift and, it seemed, almost a happy glance of fellowship as she tactfully disentangled her-

self from the drowning grasp of a submerged partner who was too evidently utilizing her as the proverbial straw, and piloted him through the doorway. She was looking, Dorr thought, particularly lovely and alive that night, and for the moment, despite his preoccupation with Careth Lindsay, some dim echo of the old pang stirred him, only to be smothered in pity for her inevitably advancing fate. Yet no girl in the room seemed more care-free and instinct with the joy of living than she.

"Feel like finishing out this dance with me, Carol?" he asked.

She considered him critically. "Are you sober?"

"Pickled," he grinned. "I've broken over my rule for the occasion and had one whole drink. Why this particularity, though?"

"I've made a desperate resolution not to take on another jag tonight, which looks like sentencing myself to the wall for the rest of the performance. Tom Lindsay was my finish. Got a varnish like a coat of mail."

"After looking myself over carefully, I think I can qualify in your class."

"Is it principle or vanity that keeps you on the wagon?" she teased. "I think it's vanity: you know you look like a young godling among a lot of swine and you *love* it. Don't try to look sore-eyed, now (nothing so bored Dorr as any reference to his almost blatant good looks). That gets you nowhere *avec moi*. How does it feel for a man to be so wastefully good-looking?"

"Don't be an ass, Carol," was all she got out of that.

"And to be so good, as well," she pursued, undeterred. "You know, you don't look a bit like a pattern of piety. There's something about you that fails to fit the part you've picked out for yourself. Tell me, honest-to-God, now; isn't it a strain sometimes being so damned good?"

He grinned serenely. "Try it and see. But don't take pattern by me. I'm not damned good at all."

"You were, on the ice; I'll say that for you. It was the old 'Flash' Manning back again, all right. Did you ever play better in your life?"

"Don't believe I ever did," he admitted. "I think this is my grand chance to retire on my laurels. But it's easy to play well when you've got absolute confidence in your team."

"You were the team mostly. You played every position on it but goal at one minute or another."

"Hogged the ice, in other words. Well, I certainly got a kick out of it."

"It's certainly your night to howl. You're the most popular man in town. They're talking of giving Careth Lindsay a trophy for having engineered you into the club." She leaned back from him and looked him in the face, smiling coolly. "Dorr, are you still as mad as ever about her—or madder?"

"You asked me that once before," he answered, frowning.

"And got my frame well jumped for it. Yump again, Steve Brodie; I tank you make it in about two yumps."

"I haven't any inclination to jump," he returned stiffly.

"*Nor* to discuss the matter further, says you. Right,

says I. . . . End of the dance, and I'll bet you've got the next one with Careth."

"You can easily find out by watching."

"Registering dignified displeasure, and not too well, at that. If you've got to have excitement," she added, impudently, "why not backtrack to the old days and make love to me again? I'm looking for experience, as you know, and I think you might be quite an interesting experience. You were once."

"I suppose that's all it was to you," he retorted with such quiet bitterness that she looked at him, surprised.

"No," she replied, sobering down, "it was rather more than that. But that," she concluded, reverting to her teasing tone, "was before you elected yourself my guardian of morals. You've been neglecting your duties lately. Don't you want to know about my progress down the primrose path—with not-too-much accent on the 'prim'?"

"No."

"No. Wuff!" she mocked. "Come on, Dorr, liven up. I feel so top-of-the-heap tonight, and you know they say that always comes just before something awful, like typhoid or skidding off a roof or something."

A quick fear darkened his face.

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of *that*," she cried hastily and painfully. "Though, of course— Oh, Dorr! Why did you have to go and make me think of that!"

"I'm sorry," he said. "My foolish face gave me away. Carol, I can't ever quite forget— Oh, let's talk of something else. There's the music, dying on us. Can I have another later—or more? If I'll promise to be very good and frivolous?" he pleaded.

"I'll try you with one and see how you frivvle, though you don't deserve it. We used to frivvle so well together, Dorr, in Paris. But we seem to have got out of the habit."

It was after two o'clock when Roy Bretton, creditably sober and quite subdued, came around and inquired solicitously whether he could break in on Dorr Manning long enough to have part of one dance before the evening closed. Carol agreed regally, adding that they might as well make it the last, as it was nearing three o'clock. The hour had struck when she got back to Holiday Knoll, and bade her escort good night, more healthily tired than she had been for weeks, and ready for a good, sound, all-forgetting rest.

Therefore she was the more surprised and disappointed at waking up in the dead of night, feeling quite disinclined for further sleep; in fact, thoroughly rested. She turned over, yawned, stretched luxuriously, rubbed her eyes, and fell to thinking boastfully of the adroitness wherewith she had sidetracked Roy Bretton's intended proposal. Roy bored her now; even repelled her. The attraction of his rampant masculinity was quite gone; something so much finer had come into her life with her understanding of and devotion to Max. That day's letter from him had been enthusiastic; the work was going splendidly. Mme. Curie had willingly pledged herself to complete her part of the experiments after he left; probably he could get away within six weeks. Of his health he said nothing; but, then, he seldom did. Still, his reticence worried her a little. She had answered his letter that afternoon, and then, after long self-communion, had written another letter

to him, long and tender and revealing, not for immediate transmission, but to be left in a sealed envelope, addressed to Dr. Bobs, for delivery to her lover in case he came back too late.

She had been able for weeks now to think of his return, if without yearning or passion, at least without repulsion or fear, and even with a kind of excited anticipation; a sense of adventure still unfulfilled in her life, something to take her mind off that later and grimmer adventure so surely impending. But now another thought was obtruding between her and her lover; a thought which made her glad she had written that final letter before the party. Why should the figure, the impression, the *feeling* of Dorr Manning interpose itself like the threat of a veto between her and Max? She told herself that it was only the influence of his standards upon her mind, the attempted restraint of a moral code wherefrom she deliberately stood emancipated—but she knew, deep within, that it had become more vital, more personal than that. And she summoned her will power to banish it from her mind.

Into that inner struggle there intruded from the outer world a strange sweetness, repeated over and over; the living, liquid song of a pioneer spring bird. From a distance the mate answered. Again the first bird gave out its melody, and that vernal music became suddenly the most terrible sound that the agonized listener had ever heard. She lay, stiffened into a stillness too rigid for trembling, and listened to two birds pouring out their song—*in the dead of darkness!*

Belowstairs there was the familiar stir of the household.

Slowly, slowly, and with all the power of her will set to every motion, Rollo got up and orientated herself. Yes; this was the left side of the bed—for one horrible moment she was not sure that she could tell her right hand from her left—and the dresser with the keys must be *there*. She groped to it, and the success warmed her stiffening blood a little. From thence to the closet was easy; the trunk stood ready to her hand, but a paralysis cramped her fingers when she felt for the keyhole in the little drawer. At last it opened; she seized on the object of her quest. . . . Footsteps outside! Pat's throaty call:

"Aren't you *ever* going to get up, Lazy?"

Rollo was all cool resolution now. If only she could control her voice. "What time is it?"

"Nearly ten. What's the matter? Got a cold? Your voice sounds queer."

The girl moved softly toward the window outside which the bird song still sweetly sounded—in the darkness. "Nothing. I—I've had a bad dream." (That was it! The plan was working out in her mind now.) "There's someone at my window," she cried in simulated terror. "Trying to get in."

"There can't be," returned Pat, incredulous but alarmed. "Let me——"

The first shot and the splintering of glass cut her off. At once the second followed and a fall. Pat shrieked and beat on the door; then ran. . . .

"Hello. . . . Yes; this is Bobs. . . . Slower, Bambina. What is it? . . . What! Rollo? What's that about nightmare? . . . Shot herself trying to prevent

someone coming into her room? . . . All right; I'm coming."

Now he stood over the stilled form on the bed.

"So," he muttered. "You fixed it so that there should be no stigma of suicide on the house. Nightmare, eh? And two shots. Good camouflage! . . . It came on you in the night, then, like a thief in the night. Poor kiddie! Game kiddie! Ah, well, perhaps you were right. But——"

He set to work.

CHAPTER XVI

Being dead, reflected Rollo, was not so bad as might have been expected. Nor was it so complete; not nearly. After that one hideous crash of agony, the restfulness was a long relief; long, but not endless, which was queer when you came to think of it; also painful, because it seemed to hurt, that process of thinking. Otherwise there was no pain; just a sort of pervading unease. And darkness. Of course. . . . Wait, though. She had killed herself to escape darkness; was she still to have the burden of it after death? Could that be her punishment for self-destruction, that the sense of blindness was to persist in the after-life? That would be an extra touch of malignancy on the part of the Unjust Powers. She stirred distressfully.

A voice. Quiet, authoritative, and—human! Saying, "Drink this." That is what they always said to the injured person coming back to consciousness in plays and stories. She was coming back to consciousness, then. To life! Something had gone wrong. She hadn't killed herself. It would have to be done all over again, she thought feverishly and peevishly. *Nothing* ever went right for her; it was perfectly rotten! She wanted to cry but couldn't do it satisfactorily because everything she was accustomed to cry with was tied up tight in bandages. Her face felt as if it were blown all to pieces; yet she had tried to hold the muzzle far

back because she did want to look pretty after she was dead. And now, most likely, she had no face left to look pretty with. Jinxed again!

If she did die, a mess, she hoped they wouldn't let Dorr Manning see her. He had thought her beautiful at the club that last night—was it last night or a week or a month before? For one unguarded moment she had surprised in his face the old, intent, wistful, warm look of *wanting*, and had been sharply sensible of an aching response to it within herself. Since then she had seemed to have heard his voice somewhere, hoarse with anxiety, calling her back, and to have struggled to emerge from the black silence and answer him. But why? What should it all mean? What interest had she in Dorr Manning?

All this thinking cost too much in pain. If someone would only come and lay a strong, cool hand on her forehead, and hold it there, the pang might ease. Whose hand? Max's? Oh, poor Max! She wondered whether Dr. Bobs had sent him her letter. He'd come back and find her face just a smear, and that would cure him of his love for her. The best thing that could happen to him.

Somewhere she heard the subdued, sweet hoarseness of Pat Scott's voice, and reflected that she must keep up the bluff of an accident. What a rotten nuisance! How could she have botched it so! Next time—but that hurt too much for immediate consideration. Time enough to figure that out later.

"Well?" queried Pat imperatively as Dr. Osterhout came out of the room.

"It's all right. She'll pull through."

"Whee-eew!" Pat drew a mighty breath and let it wheezle out between her white little teeth. "Rejoicings! I'd look punk in black, especially on maternity pattern lines. Bobs!"

"Well?" He took on an aspect of lamb-like innocence, forewarned by her tone of impending trouble.

"What did she do it for?"

"I've told you a dozen times that, on the evidence of what you heard, it was plainly a case of nightmare."

"Oh, sure!" retorted the disdainful Pat. "And I, personally, am the late Queen Victoria. Try me with the truth, once. I can stand it."

"Well, what's your idea?" inquired the cautious Bobs.

"Max Slater."

"D'you think so, Bambina?" His mind shot back to that heavily-sealed letter in his keeping. Though he knew, of course, that Max could not be the main impelling motive, he did wonder what his part in the girl's life might be.

"There was something going on before he left for Europe, and I've heard talk that Max and Rollo walked out on the Dangerfield party and weren't seen again till next morning."

"Don't believe it. Max isn't a rotter."

"And Rollo's no dim-wit. If she pulled a thick stunt like that, I'll bet nobody would be onto it. But there's been a queer sort of recklessness about her for months now; Cary and I have both noticed it; as if nothing mattered to her. And she might be crazy about Max,

you know, at that. He's got something, though it isn't the usual lady-killer stuff."

"Do you think I ought to write to him about this?"

"N-n-n-no; not yet. Wait till we see whether Rol is going to spill anything to me."

"It'll be a week yet before she ought to talk. And—and, Bambina, I'm afraid I've got to take a desperate chance and tell you something that isn't my secret."

"What d'you mean, desperate chance!" retorted the resentful Pat. "I'm as safe as the parrot that was born tongue-tied. Whose secret is it and what are you doing with the darn thing if it isn't yours?"

"Rollo did try to kill herself. It was because she was going blind."

"Blind!" Pat stared, with the fallen lip of stupefaction. "Oh, poor kid! Poor, game kid! She never let on a word of it to us. How did she come to find out about it?"

"I told her. I had to."

"That would explain that recklessness we noticed," mused Pat. "What a life she must have been living." Suddenly she turned upon him, a little fury. "You devil, Bobs! Why didn't you let her die?"

"I'm not God, you know, my dear," he pointed out, "to arrogate to myself the decisions of life and death. My business is to save where I can."

"But to bring her back to face a whole lifetime of blindness. Oh, Bobs, it's too poisonous of you!"

"She won't have to. The unbelievable has happened. She isn't going to be blind after all."

"And you told her that she was? Well, I will say,

Bobs," pronounced the young wife with lofty and judicial disfavor, "you're a hell of a doctor."

"You can't say it to me," he declared hotly. "I won't take that even from you. I had the opinion of the best man in America."

"Stung on the bump of professional pride," observed the irritating Pat. "Wax not rampant, my beloved doc. Expert or no expert, you seem to have boobed up the case with special thoroughness."

"It was a miracle, I tell you. That bullet did by chance what science wouldn't dare do by intent. It relieved some obscure pressure back in the brain and restored her sight. It almost makes one believe in a personally interested God," he concluded gloomily.

"I do," was the prompt reply. Pat was as conventional in belief as she was unorthodox in behavior. Besides, she could not quite see how any being, even the Infinite, who was privileged to have her acquaintance, could help but be *somewhat* interested in her intriguing young self. "And Rollo doesn't know yet?"

"You're the best one to tell her. I want it done before the bandages come off, so that she'll be spared the shock as much as possible."

"All right. I'm the little goat. But how did you find out that she can see if she doesn't know it herself?"

"Spotted it when she was coming out of the ether and semiconscious. She must have gone totally blind in the night or she wouldn't have tried to kill herself. I bandaged her eyes as soon as I found out."

"If I'm any judge of Rollo, she'll kill herself again and make a job of it this time, unless she's told pretty soon. Could she stand it today?"

"Yes. Go ahead," he assented after long hesitancy. "I'll be downstairs if you need me."

"That you, Pat?" came thickly from the bandaged face on the pillow as the other tiptoed into the room. Rollo had an uncanny ability to sense the identity of people, even at a distance.

"Yep. How are you feeling?"

"Gummy. How long have I been here?"

"Several days," was the noncommittal answer.

"Have I?" She sniffed the air. "Who sent the roses?"

"Everybody in town. Dorr Manning's to blame for the bunch nearest you."

"Dorr? Has he been here?"

"Every day—and then some."

Rollo's figure stirred a little on the bed. She drew in a deep breath. "Glad they left my nose in the open at least. What happened to me, Pat?" she inquired innocently, taking up again the game fiction which she had devised for the shooting. "I seem to remember firing at someone who was trying to get into the room——"

"You needn't try to put that stuff over," broke in Pat, who was anything but a tactician. "I know all about it. You thought you were going blind. Well, you had a bum steer, my child. Get that into your head, will you?"

"No use bluffing, Pat," retorted the girl drearily. "Everything is black as night."

"Naturally, since you've got a bandage a foot thick over your eyes."

"Take it off," said Rollo imperiously. "I think you're lying to me."

Pat loosened the swathings a little so that the patient could open one eye. She felt the whole bed quiver under the sudden start. For long seconds the figure lay in perfect immobility. Then slowly there broke from the throat a sound ugly to hear. The girl was laughing.

"Rollo! Stop it!" commanded Pat, terrified.

"Can't I laugh at the record joke ever played on anyone?"

"I don't know whether you can or not," returned her cousin, relieved, but still suspicious. "What is this so-merry jape?"

"Oh, nothing. Except that I'd figured out my little game on the theory of a quick finish so that it wouldn't matter what I did. And—and I did it. That's all."

Pat gaped at the other wishing she could see the expression of the enwrapped face. "Tell Mother," she wheedled. "You haven't went and gone wrong or anything like that, have you?"

"Worse. I've guessed wrong."

"Well, you can always unguess, can't you?"

"Not without making the mess more awful than it is now. Oh, God, Pat! This business of taking your life into your own hands— That's what Dorr warned me against, at the first, but I wouldn't believe him. And now look at the poor darn thing; alive and no place to go. Are there any letters, Pat?"

"Stacks."

"From France?"

"Eight."

"Give 'em to me."

"Not without Bobs's sayso."

To this the physician, appealed to, put an emphatic veto. Three days, at least, he dictated, before Rollo could even begin to read. To Pat's helpful suggestion that she act as Rollo's eyes in the matter, the patient returned an emphatic declination. "And I won't sleep or rest till I have them," she declared.

"You won't get 'em till you rest," countered the hard-hearted physician.

Forced to accept this basis, Rollo did behave herself with some degree of submissiveness until the appointed day, when Pat brought her back the missives, prudently withdrawn by Osterhout.

"You needn't stay in the room," dictated the invalid, taking them. Pat retired, remarking that she would be within call and that Bobs was downstairs. "I'm not going to chuck any hysterics," said Rollo contemptuously.

Left alone she carefully selected the letter with the latest postmark and, with clenched teeth, opened it. After reading, she slipped it under her pillow, closed her eyes and lay rigid. Thus Pat found her an hour later.

"Asleep, Rol?"

"No. I want to talk to you."

"Bobs told me not to let you overdo."

"Pat, if I don't talk I'll bust."

"Bobs wouldn't want you to bust," conceded the other, in whom curiosity was now yeastily fermenting. "What's happened?"

"Max is coming back."

"Joy-bells, hallelujahs, and all that sorta thing?"

"He's coming back in two weeks. Pat, what shall I do?"

"Answers for the Anxious on page 27," returned the helpful Pat. "Shake hands politely but not effusively and say 'Welcome stranger'; such would be my best guess."

Rollo's lips were a thin, whitey-blue line. "I've got to go through with it. I've *got* to," she murmured.

Pat's strong, dark brows went up. "Go through with what?"

Ignoring this, Rollo asked in a peculiar, listless tone: "Is my face spoiled?"

"You asked that as if you don't care or not whether it is," marveled Pat.

"I don't."

"Well, it's not. I wouldn't even let 'em clip your hair down short as they wanted it. They did sort of bob it. You're out o' luck on the fashion side, Rol."

"I'm out of luck having any face left," returned the girl bitterly. "I don't suppose a man can keep on being in love with a girl who hasn't got any face, can he?"

"Don't know. I've always had one of my own and a pretty good one, so I've been told on reliable male authority," said the flippant Pat. Then: "Who is it, Rol? Still Max, that's on your mind?"

"Yes."

Pat gathered together the forces of her audacity. "How much of this rumor stuff about the Dangerfields' party is true?"

"All of it."

"You don't know what they've been saying."

"If they've been saying that I went home with Max and stayed till morning, they're right."

"Well, I'll be— What's the idea? Were you pickled?"

"As sober as I am now."

"Rol! *Did* you? The—the three mile limit?"

"Can't you understand that there weren't any limits for me then? I'd fully made up my mind not to live a day after I'd gone blind. So it didn't matter what I did."

"Whee-ew!" whistled Pat. "All figured out and then the finish indefinitely postponed. *I'll* set it to music that you guessed wrong!"

The hurt girl's hand beat upon the bed-cover. "What matters now is that he's coming back."

"Well, don't you want him back if—if—" began her bewildered cousin.

"I've promised to live with him as soon as he comes back," was the dully effortful rejoinder.

"What-t-t!" squawked Pat in the tone of an outraged hen. "Right here in Dorrisdale? You're crazy."

"Oh, well; *you* know. I don't mean I was going to take up quarters in his house."

"I think he's a dirty dog to ask that of you."

"He didn't. And he isn't," flamed Rollo. "What do you know of him? He's too big and fine for you to judge, or me either."

"You *are* bats over him, aren't you!"

"No," was the wretched reply. "I wish to God I were!"

"*No?* Then how in the sacré nom de Kelly did you

come to crash with him? He didn't hypnotize you, I suppose."

"Haven't I told you," was the weary response, "that it didn't seem to matter?"

"Then why work up a fever over it now?"

"Because I've got to go on living, of course. I *want* to go on living if I'm to have my sight back."

"Yes; that's a good enough reason, but I'll bet it isn't the only one," said Pat, astutely. Her terrier-like mind was sniffing about in all directions, seeking a trail. "Why have you gone sour on Max?"

"I haven't. I'm terribly fond of him."

"A little more conviction, please, if you want to get that across. You're 'terribly fond of him,' yet you yearn to take to the solitary woods at the thought of his coming back. What's the answer?"

"I—don't—know," answered Rollo, lying pitifully to herself as well as Pat.

Pat's briskly coursing mind took another sharp turn. "Will you save my tottering reason by telling me why, if you're not nuts on him, you're going to stage the seventh commandment when he comes back?"

"I've as good as promised."

"Call the ambulance for Miss Trent. The poor girl's raving."

"I know it must sound wild——"

"Wild! It sounds like the Bolshevik National Hymn. If he isn't a dirty dog he won't even try to make you come through when he sees you're off the idea."

"He isn't going to see," declared the girl through hard-set jaws. "I'm not going to let him."

"Help! Bobs!" ejaculated Pat faintly. "Now I know it's delirium."

"Pat, I'm going to tell you the whole thing. Max's secret, too." (Everybody is telling me other people's secrets today—thought Pat with an exultant sense of being at the core of life for once—first Bobs and now Rol.) "But if you ever let out a word of it——"

"Safe like a whitewashed sepulcher," asseverated the incorrigible Pat, and with this assurance Rollo recounted briefly the tragedy and heroism of Maxwell Slater, Pat listening with strained attention.

"I see. It looked like last call for dinner for both of you," was her profane commentary. "Only it turned out not to be, for you. Are you sure it is for him? Maybe his case isn't hopeless any more than yours."

The girl shook her head. "Oh, yes; it is. A year's the very most they give him. Isn't it too terrible, Pat; a man like Max having to go while all the cheap wasters and fluffers go on leading their footless lives."

"Fate certainly has gypped the game," admitted Pat, impressed.

"I'm the one thing he's got left, now that his main work is finished," pursued the girl. "His one little chance of happiness before he goes out. And he loves me so! Pat, I can't go back on him now."

"No, I don't see how you can. If he's got only a short time left, you might carry on and get away with it. But, oh, Rol, old girl," she cried, her inbred social conventionality breaking out, "how could you ever have taken such a chance in the first place!"

"Is your moral sense so easily shocked after growing up in this town?" came the sardonic inquiry.

"I haven't got any moral sense," disclaimed Pat indignantly. "So don't try to pin that on me. But——"

"Yes; 'but.' I know all about that 'but.' If I'd given Max my money, knowing that I'd only a little while to live, you'd have said it was all right. If I'd given my life for his, you'd have said I was a hero. Because I've given him the only thing I could give him, you throw a holy fit over it, and pull a line of how-could-you's on me. Pat, you make me sick!"

But Pat's mind was now exploring another part of the terrain. "You didn't get any happiness out of it yourself, though," she assumed profoundly.

"What makes you say that?" Rollo's voice was noncommittal.

"You'd want him back if you had."

Rollo said in pitiful appeal: "What's wrong with me, Pat? Don't I love him enough? Or am I one of those queer, fish-blooded women? They say a lot of women are like that; something left out of them."

"It wasn't left out of me, thank God!" said Pat cheerfully. "I've had my share of thrills out of life. Only, I love Cary and that holds me."

"Well, I love Max—in a way. Only——"

"Only?" echoed Pat. "What's your 'only'? Or who?"

Rollo stared out into space silently. In her busy mind, Pat began to call the roster. Roy Bretton? No; that was over, if it ever began. Warren Graves? Rollo had taken a positive dislike for him since the night of the balcony apparition. Not Sam Beaumont, though he was evidently keen on her, nor Tom Lindsay, nor any one of a dozen others whom she called swiftly to mind, in

so far as one might judge from the girl's own attitude. Dorr Manning then? There was more to support that.

"It isn't Dorr, Rol?"

The form on the bed quivered. "No."

"It had better not be," reflected Pat aloud. "Careth Lindsay's got her claws set in his hide."

"Do you believe that?" Rollo's tone was admirably controlled, but the fingers of her nearest hand contracted slowly.

"Good Lord! It is Dorr," thought Pat, dismayed. "What a mess! When does Max land?" she asked.

"He sails as soon as his work is done. I don't know exactly. Pretty soon now." She quivered as she spoke.

She'll go through with it—thought Pat, her easy-going soul a little awed, as she studied her cousin. The light of woman's eternal and limitless sacrifice for the man who calls from the depths—*de profundis*—upon her deathless instinct of protectiveness, of mothering, was dimly radiant upon the set face of Carol Trent.

CHAPTER XVII

Those rumors connecting Rollo's name with Maxwell Slater's, which had flagged with the passage of time, took new stimulus from the "accident" to the girl. The prestige of the Scotts was sufficient to force polite acceptance of the theory of an imagined or attempted burglarious entry into her room; but the assent to this version was for the most part but a mask for cynical incredulity. That there had been some sort of an "affair" between Rollo and Max was generally believed; the more malicious theorists held that he had run away from the consequences and that she had tried to kill herself in despair, lest a worse thing befall her. This last was the thinly veiled suggestion of *Town Topics*, that Inspired Gazeteer of the Smart.

When he read the unmistakable paragraph, Dorr Manning set about tracing the original rumors, and struck a trail leading to a man named Bradbury who lived across the street from Slater's bungalow. Through a son who was a member of his Boys' Club, Dorr knew Bradbury. He went to him, demanding explanations. He got a definite one.

"I didn't mean to start anything on the young lady," said Bradbury, who was a well-meaning enough fellow. "I was sorry for her that morning when I saw her standing looking at an empty house. But like a fool I told my wife. You know what women are for talk, specially

when they get anything on one of the swell bunch. I'll guarantee to stop her clack now, if you say so, Mr. Manning."

Dorr did say so with emphasis. He then set to considering what he ought to do in the matter. Weeks before he had written to Max—their intimacy was such as to warrant this incursion into private affairs—warning him that there had been an undesirable lot of gossip going. Now, he felt, if there was anything in it, Max should be on the ground to defend the situation and put the fear of God into the rumor-mongers, as he could do, for he was known as a fighter when aroused. A guardedly worded but urgent cable was dispatched. The response was prompt; Max would sail at the earliest opportunity; two or three weeks at latest. Meantime ought Dorr to speak to the girl herself about the talk, to put her on her guard? It occurred to him to consult Pat Scott, who possessed none of the qualities of the dove, but all of those more useful ones appertaining to the serpent, when worldly matters were in question. Called on the phone, Pat promptly bade him come over at once and stay to luncheon. Rollo, she informed him, was officially convalescent and sitting up. She neglected to add that a couch had been made up for the patient on the second floor balcony, where, if the visitor came on foot, he would be pretty sure to see her before reaching the door. Further pampering her appetite for the dramatic, Pat refrained from warning her cousin of the impending visit; she was curious to know what kind of spark surprise might strike out between those two. If the spark caught and the tinder were inflammable enough, there might then and there be lighted a flame

strong enough to burn away the walls slowly closing in to encompass Rollo. Thus the plotter, Pat!

Cutting across-lawn on foot, through the green-pricked shrubbery of the early spring around Holiday Knoll house, Dorr saw the girl on the balcony. He stopped and lurked in the screen of a hedge-end, to saturate himself in the new, old loveliness of her. This was the veritable Carol of his Paris love and flight, reverted again to the very self of her budding womanhood; the face a little thinner for her slow convalescence, the small head sunning over with blithe curls as he had first seen it when the wind of thundering destruction had swept her cap away on the winter mountainside. Her near approach to death had shadowed her physical vividness to a delicacy which would have been over-fragile but for the warm curves of shoulder, breast, and throat. The face seemed subtly to have drawn out to more suave proportions, molded as if the artist who modeled had devised every line to direct the glance upon the soft, full droop of the lips above the firm chin, before lifting to the wide-set, lucent, grave eyes. In them was something slumbrous, unawakened, as there was immanent in the very poise and promise of her slim, young fullness, in the sensuous, quivering nostrils, the faintly shaded upper lip, the swift, changeful color, witness to the turbulent blood underneath. Here was the type of womanhood to which full surrender would be a difficult, but a great and gracious act. He thought, with a catch of the breath, that where her lips touched in love and passion, there would they cleave until they had drawn the heart after them. Perilous thoughts! Dorr shook

himself, mentally, angrily free of them and stepped out into view.

Carol saw him at once. Across her face passed a swift, uninterpretable change, like sunlight to bedimming shadow—or was it not, rather, like shadow to dazzling, obscurant sunlight? She called out gayly:

"What can I do for you, my good man?"

He fell in with her mood. "We are showing today, lady, a combination crimping iron, bridge score, pocket still, and painless tooth extractor, which is a triumph of science, a solution of the high cost of living, and a boon to suffering humanity."

"That's me," was her prompt response. "Bring me up a dozen at once."

He measured the height. "Unfortunately I left my wings at home."

She peered over the railing. "My robber came up that way. Are you less enterprising?"

"A dare?" He estimated the foothold afforded by the stone corner-bindings of the wall, and the strength of a creeper liana that clambered up. Disregarding her half alarmed, half incredulous, "Don't be an imbecile, Dorr," he mounted. With breathless, misgiving delight in his physical address and competency, she watched his sure ascent until he stood beside her.

"What a kid you are, Dorr," she rebuked him. "That was a fool stunt."

"It isn't a fool stunt if you get away with it, is it?" he denied. He felt suddenly in wild spirits at the sight of her, the warmth of her nearness.

"I never meant you to do it."

"Then you shouldn't have held up your robber as a

pattern. I might take a dare from a circus performer, or a theological student, or even a bootlegger, but never from a second-story man."

"I don't have to keep up that robber fake with you, at least," she returned. Face and tone darkened as she added: "You were right, Dorr. So right! I could hate you for being so right. One can't take the ordering of one's life into one's own hands. See what a botch I've made of it."

"Dear, fierce rebel with eyes of storm," he murmured.

"What's that?" she asked quickly. "It sounds like poetry."

"A line I came across somewhere. It seemed so to fit you as you were that day when I climbed the rock after you, that I haven't been able to forget it. Do you remember, I begged you not to take things into your own hands without letting me know first, without giving me a chance? You might have trusted me that far, Carol, if only for old friendship's sake."

Her eyes slanted away from the sad accusation of his, but she declined the issue. "Oh, let's be blithe and merry children, like my pestilent young namesake in the series. Why haven't you ever called me Rollo like the others?"

He shook his head, smiling; "I don't know Rollo."

"She isn't so hard to know. Much more like the run of girls than Carol was. Did you think you knew Carol?"

"I had a foolish and fleeting impression to that effect in Paris."

"Carol thought she knew you. And then you walked out on her and spoiled the picture."

"The picture," he asserted, "was taking on the colors of real life. And now it seems to have come back again."

"They never come back. Not really. There's nothing deader than two years ago except maybe last year. It's my semibobbed hair that has fooled you."

"Possibly. But I think it's something more than that, too." He scanned her with intent speculation. "I feel quite as if this were the Quai de Béthune again."

" 'Huzzah!' said little Rollo, clapping his (or her) hands in pretty glee," freely misquoted the girl. "I'm feeling quite Paris-y, myself, today. I suppose it's because I've come back to life. Help me wipe out a couple of years, Dorr. Awfully streaky years, with a lot of white, and one big smear of threatening black. And now the black is gone."

"Also the years. You certainly look it today. You're just an irresponsible kid again, to look at you."

"Absolutely! Take me out and buy me a glass of grenadine, won't you? See, there's the quai down there, and the roadway is the Seine. There was a balcony on the house there, too, you know. You used to threaten to bring around a lute and serenade me because it looked so medieval."

"That's because you were on it," he stated with conviction.

"Meaning that I'm medieval? I'm much too modern for you, old Puritan!"

"Yet," he mused, "you fitted into Old Paris, the lovely Old Paris that we explored together, as if you belonged to it."

Her eyes lighted up with reminiscence. " 'Member

the funny little airless taverns in the Cité where we saw the two fishermen fight with bottles?"

"I'm not likely to forget it," he answered, and she knew that he was thinking of the moment when she had turned and clung to him; but she chose to put another interpretation upon it:

"I should think not. You must have the scar yet where you stopped the broken glass on its way to my head."

"It was meant for *le patron*, that bum shot. That isn't the only scar I carried away from Paris," he added beneath his breath.

He thought that she started to reply to this, but she answered only: "Let's look."

Against his protests she made him roll up his sleeve, disclosing a white weal above the wrist. She touched it and involuntarily her fingers encircled strongly and slenderly his forearm. A little shudder ran through his flesh and as the lissome muscles rippled and hardened beneath her grasp, she felt a sudden shock of terror and impulse, which nothing in her experience had paralleled. Hastily she dropped the arm. Hardly could she trust her voice to be natural as she said:

"Isn't it lucky that scars heal?" With better command of herself she continued: "You took a snap of me on the bridge, that day. Got it yet?"

"No."

"Lost it? Careless youth."

"No: I didn't lose it."

"Destroyed it, then?"

"Yes."

"With appropriate ceremonies to the past, I hope," she taunted. "When did you do the fell deed?"

"The night of the Dangerfield party."

Carol repressed a gasp, managing to say: "Why, then, after keeping it so long?"

"I don't know. I just—destroyed it."

(Thank God he doesn't know—she thought—and cursed herself for cowardice. Why should she be afraid to have Dorr know what had happened that night? She was not ashamed or sorry, she told herself vehemently. And she could trust Dorr to understand. She could trust Dorr for anything. Was it only coincidence that he had torn up the long-cherished picture at that particular time? Or something deeper, more instinctive, more mysterious—and symbolic? Why not tell him everything, here and now? How would he take it?)

She leaned back, studying him with half-veiled gaze. He looked, she thought, white and strained. Had that brief, unpremeditated contact stirred him as it had her? His look crossed hers and her mood changed. A soft, laughing recklessness swept her, fetching to her eyes a still gleam, to her lips the small flicker of a smile. Involuntarily responding to her change he said:

"Do you know, you have the stillest, most secret eyes in the world?"

"Perhaps they have to be secret."

"And I haven't the beginnings of a notion what that half smile means."

"How should you have? It's a woman's smile——"

"And I'm only a man. But I'd like to know."

"It's my own private smile. Mostly I keep it inside where I can enjoy it better."

"Inside I suspect it's mockery; isn't it?"

"No. It's innocent amusement. It's amused at itself because it knows so little of what it's all about."

"I'd like to warm it into laughter," said he unsteadily.

"How do you know it would be laughter?" she challenged softly.

"What then?"

"How should I know—yet?"

As if by some magnetic compulsion rather than any conscious motion, they drew to each other's kiss. Out of that immergence there leapt a flame which, for one incredible second, bound and fused them. Her nerves were an attuned harp with a ripple of fiery music thrilling its strings. In a pang of terrifying and unbearable sweetness she thought: "I want him!" the confession of girlhood awakened to womanhood in the dread and promise of authentic desire.

The apparition of Max seared, a more scorching flame, through the tumult of her thoughts. How could she go back to him with the overpowering sense of Dorr's mastery now in her veins? Yet every tradition that was deepest and best in her set the thwarting "Thou shalt not" between her and this new-born, encompassing desire; her loyalty, her affection and pity for her lover, her pledged honor, which would have been in the eyes of the world her dishonor, bound her irrevocably to the brief span that might be left of his life. She thrust herself violently from Dorr, praying that he might not see in her eyes the misery and ecstasy.

"That was for remembrance," she compelled herself

to say, "and to forget by. Now we'll be sensible children again."

He moved away from her, setting his hands upon the rail like one distrustful of his balance. When he turned his face again it was haggard and stern.

"I won't say I'm sorry," he declared doggedly.

She laughed with a lightness that took the last reserve of her courage. "Don't be owlish, Dorr. It's all over and no harm done."

"Is that all it meant to you?"

"Why grow analytical over a pleasant accident?"

"Ah, yes; a pleasant accident. I see." (How much longer could she stand his looking at her as if she had become suddenly alien to him? If she broke now and their lips met again— Well, she would forestall that.)

"There's Max, you know." (How had she ever found the force to say it!)

"Yes. Max. . . . Of course. By the way, I've cabled Max to come back."

She stared, for the moment stricken to incredulous silence. "So it's you who are responsible for his coming back earlier than he planned. *You!*"

"Yes. . . . Go on. Say what you've got to say."

She felt herself choking up inwardly with strong, bitter laughter. That Dorr Manning, all unconscious, should be playing Methistopheles to her Marguerite and to the Faust of poor, fated Max Slater, was surely an incitement to the mirth of the gods—or the devils. She said only:

"Why?"

"Because I think you need him here. Because I think you want him."

"You're right," she said gently. "I do. I'm glad he's coming. I wonder how much he knows—of this." She touched the bandage on her head.

"Nothing, probably. You'll have to tell him, won't you?"

"Oh, I'm so tired and bored with *having* to do things!" she cried petulantly. "And you've spoiled everything, snapping us back out of Paris where we were having such a good time. Well, now that we're in Dorrisdale, you're going to the interclub dinner dance tonight?"

"I've got to," said he morosely.

"Naturally, being the big he hero of the occasion. And you'll have to drink the champagne round out of the championship cup and make a pretty speech. Don't take too much," she smiled, "just because I'm not there to watch over you this time."

"Could you two bear the thought of some luncheon?" inquired Pat, manifesting herself in the doorway.

At a glance she judged disgustedly that her experiment had been sterile of results.

CHAPTER XVIII

How much Carol Trent had meant him to believe concerning her relations with Max Slater was a question which Dorr took with him from Holiday Knoll for a long, solitary afternoon walk. "There is Max, you know," she had coolly reminded him, with her kiss still seething in his blood. Yes; there was Max, and at that memory his brain steadied and cooled. That there was some durable and definite bond between the two he had recognized before, otherwise he would never have ventured to send the cable of recall. All the evidence tended to show that if the girl was not actually in love with Max, she was in the receptive mood, awaiting only his return. Too perceptive not to have noted her response to his lips, he wondered whether to set this down to her overwrought nervous and emotional state, or to believe that she had taken on the Dorrisdale taint and become just a cheap, easy, and thrill-hunting "necker." Anyway, Max loved her; and Max was his best friend and a doomed man. He had forgotten that, for an insane moment; he would not forget it again.

So, he admonished himself, he must not let himself go; must not permit himself to think of love in connection with Carol,—refusing, in his self-deceiving heart, to accept the accomplished fact. And with that resolution came a revulsion of feeling. He had definitely decided to leave Dorrisdale; now he would make the most of

what was left him there. What *was* left him? Careth Lindsay. Careth, with her secret eyes, her subtle and silken appeal, the allure of her unassuaged womanhood. Anodyne for his pain! His thought of her, his want of her, was still vague, inconclusive; he was no libertine, either in purpose or fancy. But the certainty that he would see her at the dance that evening gave an almost savage zest to life, for the time.

The championship cup, filled and refilled constantly with champagne, was already on its rounds when he arrived. There was a general shout of acclaim to greet him; he was bidden to drink on pain of having his nose held and the medicine forced upon him, *à la* Fascisti, and drink he did. Across the brim of the cup he caught Careth's welcoming look, half wistful, half warning, and the caution came to his mind that for him, on that particular evening, the combination of the two excitants might well be dangerous. By clever manœuvring he contrived to get away from the beaker committee, and joined Careth.

"I began to be afraid that you weren't coming," she said quite low.

"Can't we get away somewhere and talk?"

"Not a chance, yet. I'm all wound 'round with dances. Come later when some of my partners are pickled and drop out."

It was nearly midnight when the floor began to thin out and the little corner bars to thicken up, before he got his first dance with her, in lieu of a devotee who had disproportioned his drinking to his dancing, and was led with wabbling knees and earnest protests into the outer air. She slipped into his arms with a little sigh,

and for a time followed the languorous, slow pulse of the waltz in silence. But, as an intruder came forward with the evident purpose of cutting in, she swayed Dorr aside whispering: "Take me out somewhere." On the piazza she said: "Dorr, there's trouble. Tom's sunk."

"Do you want to get him home?"

"No. He isn't sunk enough," she answered deliberately.

"What can I do?"

"Get him to bed here."

"At the club? Wouldn't he be better off in his own bed?"

"If he'd stay there. He wouldn't." Her voice was sad and sick and impatient as she added: "Can't you understand? I don't care to share my room with that reeking sop of whisky. Not tonight."

It was his turn to feel sick. "I'll get him upstairs some way."

More than an hour elapsed before Dorr returned to report that the thing had been managed, though not without much strategy.

"I'm sorry," she breathed. Then: "I'm going home."

"Shall I go with you?"

Careth's heart gave a leap and a quiver. This was what she had hoped for, not with any deliberate and avowed planning, but rather with a fatalistic readiness to accept, a let-what-may-happen, which in a woman is more perilous than any set purpose. She commanded her voice to calmness as she answered offhandedly:

"To see that no bandit stops the car on the way and steals me? If you like."

She was driving her own car. All the way home they

discussed the hockey season, Careth having the expert's point of view. But— "We're talking against time," she thought, with a sense of nervous exaltation. "Something's in the air. I wonder when it's coming and how."

She sensed in him, too, a tensity of nerves. It was the physical excitation of the triumphant athlete in his hour of victory; a dangerous phase for the man and the woman, had they but recognized it. As the car drew up at the door of her house she said:

"We ought to hold the championship for years, with this team."

He smiled vaguely. "I'm afraid I shan't be here to share it."

So it had come, the crisis she had foreboded. "You're going away?" she queried.

"I don't see any other way."

"Because of me?"

He did not answer directly. "Dorrisdale doesn't seem to be quite the place for me. Too much distraction—and temptation."

"I can't imagine you yielding to either," she mocked; "or even admitting the temptation."

Her raillery failed to bring any response in kind. "And too much talk," he added.

"Do you care?"

"I care, on your account."

"Oh, never mind me," she retorted negligently. "I'm gossip-proof, because I never let it bother me. And I thought we'd been very discreet. Certainly, you have."

She unlocked the door and stood within it, waiting for him to enter. He lingered, looking at her uncertainly.

"Is this being discreet?" he asked, smiling.

"No. And I don't want it to be," was her deliberate response, though she also smiled.

She threw off her coat in a reckless heap, switched on the lights in the big library, and wandered about the room purposelessly for a time, finally dropping into a corner of the big divan. A glare from the standing lamp spread downward about her, illuminating for him the shadowed loveliness of her eyes, the delicate and unappeased discontent of her mouth.

"Turn that out, Dorr," she directed. "I can't stand it."

The fallen dimness served only to accentuate the spell of still beauty over her face. Dorr drew in his breath sharply.

"Careth, there's something I've been wanting to speak to you about," he said.

"As seriously as that? It must be something unpleasant."

"Why should it be?"

"Because you've got your solemn, preachy look on," she teased.

"It's about the Hardpan Oil deal."

She exhaled the sigh of angelic but sorely tried patience. "I thought I'd explained it all to you. In words of one syllable. Do I have to split the syllables?"

"Adjust 'em to a financially infantile mind. I've been looking into the stock a little, and it seems to me——"

"Ah, not tonight, Dorr! I don't think I could cope with figures tonight. It may be our last talk for—for how long?"

He moved uneasily. "I don't know. Isn't that all

the more reason for clearing up the situation about the stock?"

She leaned forward, her hands tightly clasped about her knee. "Then you *are* going," she murmured. "It doesn't seem quite real. . . . I wouldn't go and leave you that way, Dorr; so—so indefinitely."

"I've got to." The words came, strained, from a constricted throat.

"Take me with you," she murmured. "Take me with you, Dorr."

She turned her head slowly upward and looked at him with a regard so still, so profound, so compelling as to draw him with tidal resistlessness. He sank to his knees beside the couch. Her arms reached softly out to take him. There was a dizziness in his brain, a flooding throb of his blood as he felt her lips quiver and soften and dissever beneath his, and the sweet, sustained fire of her passion stab through the quickened languor of their kiss.

"It had to be this way," he heard her murmur in the voice of fate, as a great billow of silence and flame swept over him.

When she spoke again it seemed to him that a thousand years might have passed.

"I didn't mean this, dear," she whispered. "You mustn't think I planned it when I parked Tom at the club. Though I knew from the first it must happen some time."

He heard himself babbling: "Forgive me, Careth; forgive me."

"What have I to forgive?" she returned gently. In an access of profound and pathetic intuition she inter-

preted, "What you're really thinking is: 'Can I forgive myself?' Isn't it, Dorr?"

"I don't know," he muttered. "I can't seem to realize——"

"Ah, Dorr!" she said, "you can't take the soul of a woman like me without taking the body, too. I'm too much woman—and too much yours. I'm sorry, Dorr—No; that's not true; I'm not sorry. Why should I pretend? But I know there's going to be a price to pay for this; call it premonition or superstition or what you like; I've got that certainty. All right"—she seemed to be speaking to some fate, far in the upper dimness—"I'll pay."

"No; not you. Not you, Careth!"

The look that she turned to him was brooding, maternal almost. "Go home now," she bade him. "And don't let that tyrannical conscience of yours torture you any more than you can help."

He was in command of himself now. "Never mind me. We've got to figure this out, you and I."

"But not now. I—I couldn't, quite, now," she said, wanly smiling.

"When then? Tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow. I've got people here all day. (Good God! People!—he thought. As if people mattered in the face of this crisis!) Come Monday morning."

"I'll be here at ten."

She nodded. "Maybe I'll be up at that unholy hour. Good night—*boy.*" Her kiss was lingering, tender, almost without passion.

A haggard Dorr waited for an interminable half hour beyond the appointed time on Monday. In the two in-

tervening days of self-questioning, self-torturing, self-reckoning, a hideous realization had forced itself upon him. In the reaction from his hour of passion, there had stood forth beyond all denial the fact of his overwhelming, all-inclusive love for Carol Trent; as if the episode with Careth had but served to sweep away the last self-defensive illusion. And he—what was he to think of himself in the light of that blasting revelation? To have taken one woman when he loved another, that was, for Dorr Manning, an adultery more shameful than any defined by law or proscribed by commandment. Yet there was no doubt in his mind as to the course he must now pursue. He was bound in honor to Careth Lindsay if there remained to him any rag or tatter of honor.

When she came down she seemed unexpectedly serene, unexpectedly the same. He discovered that he had absurdly expected to find her in some way changed.

"Careth," he began at once, "I've thought this all out. You've got to get free from Lindsay and marry me."

"Because of what happened?"

"Yes."

"To make 'an honest woman' of me, I suppose. How kind and considerate and correct in you, Dorr!"

"No; not that, dear. Because I love you." (But why must the picture of Carol Trent, in all the gay, teasing loveliness of their last talk, rise like a corporeal creature before his mind, smiling and—denying? And he had a terrified feeling that Careth was realizing his involuntary thought.)

"I'd give every hope of every other happiness to believe that," she answered with passionate wistfulness.

"But it isn't true. I've been thinking this out, too, Dorr."

"It is true," he insisted doggedly. "I haven't been able to get you out of my thoughts since I first met you."

"Yes; I know that kind of claim that a woman sets upon a man," she answered with a melancholy cynicism of an understanding too dearly bought. "It isn't good enough, my dear."

He was aghast, nonplussed. "But if—" he began. "Do you think I'd have been rotten enough to lose my grip on myself as I did except that—unless I——"

"Could you help it?" she challenged. "There are some things too strong for any man of your temperament. You've always had to fight against it, haven't you? And in the end it proved too strong. It was bound to. Don't think that you're a lost soul because of one fault." She laughed a little, broken, bitter laugh. "Did you ever hear the young St. Augustine's prayer, the one that the pious have carefully tried to suppress; yet it's perhaps the most genuine prayer ever uttered by any saint: 'Give me chastity, oh Lord! —but not yet.'"

He winced. "Careth, don't you care enough to marry me?"

"Too much, perhaps. Do you think, with your Puritan soul, I could ever make and keep you happy?"

"Puritan!" he groaned. "Good God!"

"One doesn't cease to be a Puritan because of one slip. Have you forgotten your 'Scarlet Letter'?"

"But we can't go on this way—on these terms," he muttered.

"We could, if you cared enough. Cared really, I mean; without regret or remorse."

"How could it be without that?"

"It couldn't be, for you. And that would be the poison that would kill love. Dorr, have you ever been in love?"

He hesitated.

"You needn't answer. Do you think you've ever got over it?"

"Yes." (Again that "flash" of Carol's face.)

"I don't. It was Rollo Trent, wasn't it?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I know. Don't ask me how; I couldn't tell you how. And I know, whatever you may think, that you've never really got over it."

"You're quite wrong," he denied.

"Am I?" her face hardened. "Dorr, I received a pressing invitation yesterday to go to Europe for a long stay."

He looked his inquiry.

"With a man; a married man."

"What is the point of that joke?" he demanded harshly.

"Far from a joke. He happens to be married to me. But I don't know that that makes it any better," she added wryly. "What are we going to do about that?"

"Your husband?" he said stupidly.

"Such as he is, my husband. He is suffering severely from remorse, complicated with a touch of liver; says he feels like a slice of fresh-roasted hell and is ready to cut out the sportive life and try being good, if I will. I

did not," she added deliberately, "explain that it is just a touch late for that last, as far as I am concerned."

"You're not thinking of going with him?" said Dorr incredulously.

She looked at him from beneath drooped lids. "I'm considering it. There would be this advantage. If I left Dorrisdale you wouldn't feel that you have to, and I think you've got more of a job here than I have."

"You're not going," he repeated obstinately, "with him, after what's happened."

"What's a poor, married woman to do, in this day and age of conventions?" she retorted with her melancholy and cynical smile. "Oh, I'll tell him first. And he'll take it," she added grimly. "He's in no position not to; I've got too much on him. I don't know," she added with meditative flippancy; "maybe it'll start us off anew. That would be a highly satisfactory and moral ending to an immoral episode, wouldn't it?" she taunted him.

He winced. "Careth, it won't do. We belong to each other now. There's only one course open to us."

She shook her head, still with her questing eyes fixed on him. "That's only your sense of what's conventionally due a woman," she said with her wan little smile, and when he vehemently denied this, she finally burst out at him:

"Dorr, if we could wipe out that night from our lives, would you be here begging me to divorce my husband and marry you?"

"I loved you before that," he returned.

"That isn't answering my question," she pointed out gently.

"How can I answer it? It's an absurd question. You can't argue out a matter on a basis of things as they aren't. We've got to face them as they are."

"You see! You can't answer. You daren't answer for fear of hurting me."

"Careth, dear, look at our situation sanely. It can't continue. I won't go on the way we are."

"Afraid?" she murmured.

"Granted that I'm a coward, as well as a brute and a beast——"

"Oh, what's the use of going over that again?" she cried wearily. "It's so easy to call oneself names and so meaningless. Why try to fix blame? Nature who made you a man is to blame, if there is any blame. I don't feel sinful or ashamed. Is that because I'm hardened, Dorr, or because I love you so much; so much more than you do me? Oh, yes; it *is* true. If your love were what mine is you wouldn't care. It would override caution, sense of responsibility, conscience, everything. You never have loved me that way, even at the first."

"But I'm going away within a few days," he cried miserably. "I—I can't leave you here like this—in this uncertainty—with nothing settled between us."

"Oh, my dear," she said, "don't look on me as a ruin yet a while. Dorrisdale is full of sailors' wives who have stepped out—more than once, plenty of them—and got away with it. Just because this is my first." Her voice faltered a little, but she recovered herself quickly and continued: "No; you go away and think. Think hard. I've got a respite"—again that strange, strained smile—"of five weeks to decide. At the end of that time

I shall be all packed up and ready to sail gaily forth into a new and highly correct matrimonial life. Will you come back to see me off?"

"I'm driving you away from here," he accused himself bitterly.

"No; not that. I'm driving myself away." Her eyes softened and suffused. "I don't think I could quite stand the tall young house with wings, now; the House of the Seraph. Ah, well, Dorr, I've felt for once in my woman's life the breath of the seraph's wings before they took flight. Think how many women have never known even that. And—I expect they always fly away sooner or later."

CHAPTER XIX

As Max Slater entered the room, Rollo stood up, motionless, her pride and loyalty steeled for the test, her hands outstretching toward him. He took them in his strong grasp, held her, close-strained to him for a moment, her cold cheek pressed to his, and she felt with pity and dismay the strong tremor that shook his body as he murmured her name. To her scanning eyes he seemed little changed; if the disease had progressed it had left no mark upon the solid vigor of his frame. Nothing about him appeared different; indeed, they might have parted but a day or two before; there was nothing of that alienating effect of absence which so often makes awkward the first moments of reunion between man and woman, no matter how intimate their relation.

Releasing her from the closer grasp, he stood holding her shoulders between his hands while studying her face. In that strong grip, before the bulk and might of his masculinity, she felt frail and refugeless.

"You've been ill?" he queried.

"Yes. Didn't Dorr tell you?"

"He told me little. Just said: 'Be very gentle with her, Max; she's had a bad time of it.'"

"I have. But—do you mind giving me a little time before I tell you? I want to hear about you first."

A sort of dim glory passed into his face. "I've done the trick, Rollo."

"Your work? Oh, Max! I *am* glad."

He nodded. "My theory has proved up. They can go on with it from where I drop it, now. I've done my little job in the world, and it isn't so little, either." It was not boastfulness, but the deep satisfaction of the toiler whose work is justified. How like Max, she thought, to reply to her question about himself by telling her of the work which was to him so much more important than self! There was a responsive radiance in her as she pressed her cheek down upon his hand. He set his lips to her palm, then released her and began to pace up and down the room. "Yes; I can sing the whatever-it-is the religious people chant when the finish comes; the *Nunc Dimittis,* isn't it?"

"Feeling as religious as that, Max?" She smiled, but her intonation was tender.

"Absolutely. About this. I don't care what kind of a God there is, I can go to Him with this job in my hand and look Him in the eye and tell Him that I've done an honest day's work. If He's the God I think He is, that'll be good enough for Him. That's my religion, Rollo." He spoke with the selfless pride of the devotee.

"Yes, you've won out," she confirmed.

"And I've known the two greatest happinesses that life can give any man."

(And—she thought with an involuntary shrinking from her part of the gift which burned and shamed her—you've earned the right to them, to the full. What kind of a sneaking, crawling, side-stepping little coward should I be to deny you now!)

"You look different," he charged. "It's your hair. What have you done to it?"

"Had it cut." She took his hand and led him to the window seat, where she drew him down beside her. "There's been an accident. I—I've had an accident, Max."

"What kind of an accident?"

"Revolver."

His instinct leapt. "You—shot—yourself?" he managed to drag out.

"*Don't* look at me that way, Max. I can't bear it."

His face had changed as if some blighting flame had seared into it lines of unimaginable dread and pain. "You tried to kill yourself rather than face me when I should come back to claim you," he accused.

"Oh, no, no! You couldn't think that, Max. Not anything as cowardly and cruel as that of me."

"But you did try to kill yourself. While I was away. Without giving me a chance to prevent. When you know what you are to me," he cried, in passionate revolt.

"I wrote you a letter."

"It never reached me."

"It couldn't. It was left here to be given or sent to you afterward."

"That was thoughtful," he retorted with the first bitterness she had ever known from his lips.

"I hoped, when I wrote it, that it wouldn't be necessary for you to have it; that you'd come back before —before I had to do it."

"*Had* to do it? To shoot yourself? Don't you think you'd better explain?"

From no other man on earth would Rollo have endured that tone. But this was Max, who loved her, whom she could not love, who was suffering.

"I was going blind," she said simply.

"God Almighty! *You!* You knew it before I went away?"

"Yes."

"Yet you never said a word of it."

"Why should I heap my troubles on top of yours?" she demanded proudly.

"Because I love you."

"That's a reason," she confessed, her pride submerged in a dangerous flood of tenderness and sorrow. "But, dear, I couldn't. Don't you see I couldn't?"

"No, I don't. Why?"

"If I had, you'd never have gone. Would you?"

"Wouldn't I?" He dropped his leonine head between his hands. "No; I don't suppose I would," he admitted in accents of wonderment. "How could I have, when you mean so much more to me than anything, even my work? But you're not blind," he cried, peering into her eyes fearfully. "Are you?"

"By a miracle I'm not." She recounted to him the strange outcome of her attempt upon her life. He sat perfectly silent for minutes. When she spoke to him—"I'm thinking this out," he said. Lifting his head, after a time, he said abruptly, but gently:

"That night at my house you said: 'Anything that you ask of me, Max, any time you ask it.' Do you remember?"

"Yes." It seemed impossible to her that her voice could be so steady.

"Do you want your promise back?"

"No." Her face was white, but the eyes she lifted to his were quiet, candid, clear.

"Do you love me, Rollo?"

"You're the finest and best and most unselfish character I've ever known, and I'm proud and glad to give you anything."

"I'm answered," he murmured.

"Ah, no! You shan't take it that way. I told you before that I couldn't respond in every way—not yet. But I could trust myself to you in any relationship with absolute confidence."

"That was all very well when you thought you had only a short time to live. Now it's different. But—in any relationship, my dear? As my wife?"

"Your wife?" she faltered. "You mean you're free—already?"

"Yes, unexpectedly. She divorced me in Denmark, where we were married and where they have sane and humane laws."

"I'll marry you whenever you say, Max."

"Today?" he persisted. "Or tomorrow?"

She peered at him, puzzled by something that was almost like raillery in his manner. He stood up, smiling at her, and at sight of that smile of abnegation, of self-denial, all the blood in her body flushed back into her heart and the strong, harsh tears pricked through her eyeballs even before he spoke what she knew was coming:

"You needn't," he said. "At least—I want to be sure about this. Will you tell me something, Rollo,

even though it hurts you and you think it's going to hurt me?"

"I don't *want* to hurt you," she cried vehemently.

"Never mind. I'll live through it. I'm tough. You've got to answer this. It's vital."

"I'll answer."

"Can you make yourself think of living with me as my wife without—without shrinking?"

She lifted a piteous face to his, then rolled over upon the window seat, burying her face in her arms like a child confronted with something too big for its bewildered little soul. The square of surgeon's plaster at the side of her head was revealed to him for the first time. He touched it with clumsy, tender fingers.

"Poor kid," he murmured. "You've had a rough deal."

"Haven't I had a rotten deal!" she gulped, seeking relief from the over-burdened moment in self-pity.

He laughed. "Ah, well; it isn't going to be so bad from now on."

"But, Max," she ventured in muffled plea, half turning her face upward, "perhaps if I did marry you I might— Don't girls get over that—that feeling?"

"It isn't an experiment that I care to try with you," he returned grimly. "Oh, I know you'd be game. And I don't know but that, in time, if I had my life to live out— But, you see, I haven't."

"That's what makes it seem so *poisonous*," she wailed. "To be quitting under fire."

"Oh, no, Rol. You're not quitting. You'd never raise the Chinese flag; I know that. I'm positively declining to marry you; that's the present situation.

But there's something else that worries me. There's been too much talk about the night of the Dangerfield party."

"It doesn't worry me," she declared. "In comparison with this—with you—it all seems so petty."

"It isn't petty, since it concerns your reputation, and you're going to stay right here in Dorrisdale. There's your future to be thought of. No, Rol; damn-the-future is no good as a living principle. Damn-the-past is all right, and yet, if the past is going to carry on into the future, which is a bad habit it has—Rollo, I'm not sure but that you'd better marry me after all."

She raised her head at this. "When, Max?" was her quiet acquiescence.

"'Which lion is mine?' said the Christian martyr meekly," he chuckled. "Now, just take this coolly. You said a while back that you could trust me in any relationship."

"Absolutely."

"Then consider this proposition; that you marry me quietly next week and come to live in my house, but not with me."

The hot color flushed high in her cheeks. "Do you think I'm as rotten a sport as that, Max Slater? If I marry you, I'll be a wife to you, not a—a semi-detached housekeeper."

"Well, I'm not claiming that it would be an easy stunt for me," he admitted, "loving you and wanting you as I do. And if it were for a long time, I don't know that I could quite game it through. But as it's only five or six months at most——"

"Max!" she cried, appalled. "Is that all?"

"That's the betting."

"I'll marry you tomorrow," she panted. "Today, if you want me to, and go away with you tonight." She spoke quick and low and eager, all athrill with woman's holy pity which, in its final devotion, can override sex itself.

For a moment his face had flashed into dismaying fire. Then he put back her arms with a sighing smile.

"It won't do, my dear. It might, if I hadn't come to understand you so well."

"You do understand," she confirmed, "in the most unbelievable way. How do you do it, Max?"

"Through loving you. I can see things almost as if I were thinking with your brain. For instance, that you've changed since I went away."

"Not toward you," was the swift denial.

"Not in loyalty. Not in anything that you could control. Something deeper. . . . Do you want me to go on?"

"Go on," she bade him, almost voicelessly.

"That night at the bungalow," he pursued, "you came to me willingly. Without passion, I realize. But without repulsion. Isn't that true?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"And now?"

"Oh, not repulsion, Max! Never that, for you."

"When I came in that door today, you stood waiting to kiss me like one facing a battery of guns." He smiled, valiantly. "I thought at first it was shyness, because we'd been away from each other all this time. Now, I know better. There's someone else. Isn't there, my dear?" he queried gently.

Her whole face quivered. "I—I'll get over that, Max," she said, pitifully.

"No; you're not the kind that gets over it. If I read you, Rollo, you're one of those rare, one-man women; when their man comes they know it could never have been anyone else. The tragedy is that he so often comes too late, or, worse, never comes at all."

"But it is too late. And, anyway, he cares for someone else."

"Does he? I doubt it." Max smiled again. His manner became easy, light, semijocular. "Rollo, in the interests of peace and quiet and convenience, I still think the best possible thing for all concerned would be a marriage of—well, of neutrality between us two, and then, as a young widow——"

"Max!"

"Oh, let's face this thing squarely!" he said with impatience. "We don't have to soft-pedal about death, do we? There's too much bunk about the perfectly natural process of dying, anyway. Now this marriage thing would be so darn convenient. I could leave you my money without scandal, which I can't do now, and there are some things to be carried on that I could trust to you better than anyone else, and I think you'd be rather pleasant to have around the house, unless, of course, you whistle in the early mornings, and it would ram their own scandal down the throats of those damned garbage-mongers who have been saying that I ran away to Europe to escape from you," he concluded savagely.

The ghost of a smile appeared on the girl's lips. "If you will entertain casual young women in your house

until the unseemly dawn, you can hardly blame people for talking. The point is that I don't seem to care."

"You didn't have any reason to care then, with only a few months to go, as you thought. You have, now. Well, what about my honorable proposal?"

She caught a little of his determined gayety. "Do you call that a proposal?" she returned scornfully. "It isn't even fifty per cent."

"Rejected?"

"Rejected—without thanks. One hundred per cent or nothing."

"And what of the unknown other?"

A quick spasm contorted the sharp-cut beauty of her face. "Do you want me to tell you who it is, Max?"

"No need. I know. I'm going to send for him."

"What for?"

"To bring him back to you."

"I tell you it isn't me that he's in love with."

"And I tell you it is. He'll tell you so himself, if he comes back."

"If he should I'd have to tell him—about us."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Yes; of course, *you'd* have to tell him. It isn't done, I believe, as a rule, in our little pigpen of a community. *Caveat emptor* is the practice of the marriage market here. But you don't belong in our mire. You're on the mountain-tops."

"Only to you. Because you've set me there. What would I be to him?"

The shiver in her voice went to his heart. "Are you so afraid to have him know?"

"Deadly afraid."

"Yet you'd go right ahead and tell."

"Of course. What else is there for me to do?"

"Keep out of it. I'll tell him."

"You! You'd do that for me? What will he think of you?"

"Never mind that. I'm of no importance in this matter. But, Rollo, you've got to back me up in the little strategy that I've figured out. If the Puritan in him shows its grisly head, I'm going to shift my ground and tell him that we're married; and then we'll have to be, on my basis."

"I'll do whatever you say, Max," she yielded, not fully understanding at the moment the implications of his plan.

"Good-by, then, my dear."

Instead of taking his hand, she clung to him, her breast sobbing against his for one strained moment. "Oh, Max! I *wish* it had been you. Why couldn't it have been you?"

"I wish to God it had," he muttered, but added at once: "Lucky for both of us it wasn't. It would have made it too hard for me to die, and for you to live."

CHAPTER XX

Gossip of Dorrisdale was threatened with slow death from inanition. Nothing that the scandal-birds hoped for was coming about as it should. Max Slater was back and beginning to look a little thin and strained, and this was attributed by the informed ones to his having got a divorce in the expectation of marrying Carol Trent, who had then inexplicably turned him down. This report (strategically instigated and cleverly fostered by Max himself) had the logical effect of discrediting the former stories about Miss Trent; if it were true that she had spent a night in Slater's house, why in the name of goodness should he want to marry her, and why in the name of sanity, not to mention the conventions, should she have refused him? Dorrisdale was very feminine in social viewpoint and reasoning. No; the facts didn't hang together. Furthermore, that common little woman across from Slater's house, who had started it all, now admitted that it probably wasn't Carol Trent at all who had been seen coming with Slater from his bungalow. Whereupon out of the ruins of the once lofty structure of hint, innuendo, and half-truth, glued together with venom, rose the theory that it was quite another girl (take your pick of Dorrisdale's brightest and best of the maiden crop) who had been with Max the night of the party, and that Carol Trent, who was in love

with him all the time, had tried to kill herself from grief and chagrin over his faithlessness. The weak spot in this was that they seemed still to be friends, and were occasionally seen together.

Another tidbit had gone sour on Dorrisdale tongues. There had been some very promising rumors connecting Careth Lindsay with young Manning of the Boys' Club. But Manning had been away for some weeks, looking for another position, it was said, in spite of the unanimous protest of his Board. Careth Lindsay was going abroad in a few days, with her husband—of all people! Evidently something had happened to scotch that affair, if it had ever attained the dignity of an affair, which the pessimistically-minded now doubted. Finally, the tittle-tattle about Warren Graves and Pat Scott was off. Pat was going to have a baby, and was already inclined to be virtuous and boastful about it to her intimates. Where now to find a fresh daily dozen for the unexercised tongue?

Nothing could have been more effective in Carol Trent's behalf than the indifference to comment—it was too negative a quality to be called pride, though pride was undoubtedly its foundation—with which she resumed her place in the social scheme. If anything she was more popular than before, her attractions being enhanced by a touch of mystery, of—perhaps—desperation, though it was tacitly agreed that her story of the robber, real or nightmarish, should be accepted for social commerce. The old group of men buzzed around her with undiminished ardor, Roy Bretton, now openly and urgently her suitor, Sam Gracie, Bill Grant and half the sentimentally detached married men of

the Dirty Dozen. For none did she show any preference. Max Slater seemed still to be the favored one, if any. In fact, she would have spent all her available time with him, if he had permitted, in her passionate eagerness to make amends, to give to him all of herself that he would accept for the brief remaining period. But Max was sedulously playing the rôle which he had devised for her better protection, that of the rejected aspirant; and for her to be seen too much with him would be inconsonant with the theory. Moreover, he was beginning to abandon social activities on account of his health. There were times when Rollo distressfully suspected him of a Spartan front, covering the gnawing agony, but the only response she could elicit to her anxious questions was a brusque denial.

There came to Max a night of fiery torment, which passed leaving him spent but determined. He sent for Dr. Osterhout, listened to his verdict, and delivered his own.

"Your job from now on is to keep me out of pain, Bobs. I've got a few things to do that I can do better if I'm not groaning and writhing."

"Up to a certain point," assented the physician. "After that I don't know whether the drugs will hold you."

"Then I'll have to grin and bear it. Unless you can dig up a robber for me to do some target practice on. Though, at that, two might be too many for the public gullet. I'm going to leave a letter in your care, Bobs, to be delivered at the proper time. . . . What are you grinning at, you old ape!"

"I don't feel grinny, my boy. But the coincidence

struck me as amusing. It's for Rollo Trent, for a guess."

"Good guess."

"I've had one from her for you that I've never destroyed."

"Tear it up. I know all that's in it—and more."

"Fourth class post office activities cheerfully executed. Give me your document."

"I'll mail it to you."

After Osterhout's departure, Max wrote, rewrote, erased, amended, tore up, and recast for an hour before he had produced a brief document sufficiently satisfactory to preserve. For it was a difficult argument that he had set himself to present; and when deep calls unto deep, from a man's heart to a woman's, there are abysses of fog and darkness, filled with false gleams and distorting echoes, to be traversed. His telegram to Dorr Manning was easier, inspired as it was in part by exasperation, for Dorr had replied to his increasingly urgent letters evasively, and had not evinced any signs of coming back:

"I don't give a damn" (censored by Western Union to "hang") "how busy you are. Absolutely necessary I see you evening of 29th. Answer."

The answer came promptly. "Nine P. M. twenty-ninth."

Strategic reasons had suggested the date to Max. From certain shrewd observations he judged that Dorr would rather not have it known that he was in Dorrisdale as long as Careth Lindsay should be there, and as the 29th was the formal opening dance of the Country Club, none of the "gang," which had taken to dropping

in upon him evenings since his indisposition, would be likely to surprise them.

Dorr arrived looking anxious and harried. He scrutinized his friend's face questioningly.

"Are you worse, Max?" he asked.

"Not worse than was to be expected," was the quiet assurance.

"Why did you send for me?"

"We've got some business to arrange, you and I. And there was always the chance that you *might* not get back in time."

"Oh, I was coming back, all right. Is there any such hurry as that, Max?" he asked painfully, a wrinkle of foreboding between his intent eyes. "What does Osterhout say?"

"Not much. Never mind that. The point is, you're here."

"I can't stay, though. Unless you actually need me."

"Tonight will do. What say if we do a stroll? It's choky in the house."

"Are you up to it?"

"I'm up to anything. Reaction from a rather hellish couple of hours I had last night. Flash, have you ever known what it is to have physical pain burn your mind clear of all its underbrush so that you can see the plan and purpose of things that have looked blind?"

Dorr grunted an inarticulate sympathy. "No," he answered the query. "I'm almost ashamed to say I hardly know what bodily pain is."

"With that leopard's body of yours, of course not." Max picked up a cap and led the way out. "We'll take

Magruder Park Lane to the old road out past the Club. That'll be deserted. I expect," he added, "you've had more than a touch of the other kind of pain."

Again the other grunted. Max puffed thoughtfully on his pipe for a block.

"How much do you love Rollo Trent?" he asked quite casually.

His companion stopped dead. Under the light of an electric globe, his face looked frozen green-white.

"Hot under the collar?" inquired his friend.

"No."

"Wouldn't matter if you were. How much do you love her? Enough to marry her?"

"God!" breathed the other like a prayer.

"Meaning, I take it, an affirmative. Well, why don't you?" As there came no answer to this question, put with an effect of mild, impersonal interest, he pursued: "Anything to do with me?"

"No."

"Good lad! Why not go ahead, then?"

"I'm not fit to," said Dorr harshly.

"Of course not. Neither of us—and I judge we've been a lot more decent and straight than most of our crowd; I know damn well you have—is fit to marry a girl like Rollo Trent, in our own opinions. But what about her opinion? That has some importance, you know."

Manning looked at him bewildered. "I don't get—" he began.

"Girls mostly marry, you know," cut in Max, reasonably. "And they mostly marry men. And the girl

of today hasn't many illusions left about her little playmates of the opposite sex. Have you tested out Rollo on the subject?"

"No."

"Again—and as patiently as a tried soul may—*why* not?"

"I tell you I'm not fit to ask her," returned the other with violence.

Max nodded his head toward the tall young house with wings, rising (like an emblem of purity!) from behind its sheltering hedge. "All lighted up," he observed. "Careth's packing to leave. Has your—er—peculiar and painful reticence anything to do with that house?"

No reply from Dorr.

"Are you Careth's lover?"

"You've no right even to imply that by a question," was the hot retort.

"Oh, Flash," smiled his interrogator, "don't be a clam. Dead men tell no tales and I'm as good as dead or I shouldn't be breaking over the rules of the game this way. I'm not grilling you out of curiosity, you know."

"I'm sure of that. But—there's nothing to tell."

"The Puritan with a Cavalier finish; perjuring himself like a gentleman. I know you have been her lover; never mind how I know. It doesn't specially matter. What I'm trying to get at is whether you're really in love with her or——"

"I wanted her to get free and marry me," said Dorr hoarsely.

"*Wanted?* You asked her to, you mean."

"I begged her to, over and over again."

"Undoubtedly. You would. But—ah, no, Flash! I know Careth. She's a strange woman, and a strong woman, and a woman to tie to for life and be trusted to eternity, if she'd married a man and not a human cesspool. And she loves you; never mind how I know that, either. If you'd wanted, instead of just asked, her to marry you, she'd have got free if she had had to kill Tom Lindsay to do it."

"I tell you—I swear," lied Dorr eagerly, "there was nothing between——"

"So it was Rollo you loved all the time," mused the other exactly as if Dorr had not entered his futile protest. "And a question of your honor being answerable to Careth——"

"Careth refused to marry me."

"Brave woman! A question of your purity being answerable to yourself, then, withholds you."

They had passed out into the misty envelopment of the open road, beyond the lights of the town, where a short, steep hill led down to a brook spanned by a stone bridge. On the other side the slope took an abrupt turn as it attained the upper level. It was a lonely spot. Max seated himself on the stone balustrade and stared down at the water, rippling unseen.

"Flash, I've left you my money," he announced.

"Good Lord, man! You can't do that."

"Can't I? Why?"

"Haven't you got someone—relatives?"

"No relatives worth mentioning. Someone, yes. But I can't leave it to her without creating a false impression."

"I see. You want to leave it to me as trustee for her."

"I don't want her mentioned at all. The money will be yours outright. You will have to figure out how to get it to her privately."

"Will she take it?"

"It's up to you to make her."

"All right. Any kind of written undertaking that you want, I'll——"

"Rats! I don't want a promise from you, Flash. I'm telling you what I want done. That's enough, isn't it?"

"That's enough."

"There's about three hundred thousand of it. Cary Scott's executor. Well, that's what I sent for you for—mainly. You understand the situation?"

"Perfectly," said Dorr, steady-voiced.

"So you think. I wonder if you do. Dorr, I've got to tell you something. That tattle about Rollo spending the night in my house is true."

Dorr said nothing.

"Did you believe it?"

"The story seemed pretty straight."

"What did you think about it?"

"I thought it a pretty reckless performance."

"Nothing worse?"

"What am I, to judge anyone else?" was the bitter reply.

"Ah, the Careth obsession again! But you've got to judge for yourself, of the woman you love. Every man has."

"Not if the love is deep enough."

"I'll take you on that," returned Max quickly. "What if Rollo were my mistress?"

Dorr's hard-drawn breathing was heavy on the darkness that hid the face of the two men from each other.

"Well?" challenged Max at last.

"I'd never believe it unless you told me in so many words that it was so, or unless she did," came the reply in such a voice that the other said, wonderingly and pityingly:

"Does it mean so much to you?"

"So much! Great God, man!"

Max got to his feet and advanced slowly up the opposite slope, his companion, after a moment's hesitancy, taking up pace with him. "Look at it this way, Flash," he resumed. "Suppose she had given herself to me out of a sacred pity and affection, without desire, but with deep devotion, knowing that I love her beyond anything in the world, that she could give me a happiness such as would make death seem a small thing afterward, and wishing to make up for what life had withheld from me, in the short time remaining. Remember, always, that marriage seemed impossible then." He stopped and gripped the other man by both shoulders. "Would you think, would you *dare* to think, her degraded by that relation?"

"Degraded? No. God knows I wouldn't!"

"Would you marry her in spite of it?" the remorseless interrogator went on.

Dorr's brain was a seething whirl. Carol Trent Max's mistress! He could well believe it of the girl, knowing her resolute, resentful attitude toward her

expected fate, her independence of spirit, her contempt for conventional restraints, her courage and capacity for sacrifice. But Max! How exculpate his friend of dishonor in having accepted a sacrifice so great? Yet, if he knew of Carol's fate, why should he reject what the woman whom he loved freely offered? It was all a ghastly mistake, nothing worse; made so by the miraculous chance of that bullet. Why should he not marry her, if he might? He'd go on his knees to the gates of hell to marry her, he told himself fiercely.

Then the fiery thought of Careth, of his own betrayal, swept him. The essential Puritan in him, though it would not judge Carol Trent by standards which she disdained and rejected, did judge himself and rigorously. For he had sinned against love; against his love for Carol. He had taken this woman, out of passion. How compare that to Carol's surrender out of a high and sweet pity and affection, fulfilling what she could of her woman's mission on earth? In his strange, distorted, magnified self-condemnation he groaned aloud.

"I'm waiting," came Max's inexorable challenge. "Would you marry her?" and Dorr, his mind still upon his relation with Careth, muttered:

"How could I?"

From his friend's lips came a bark of scornful laughter. "And it was you who was arguing for the same standards for men and women. I told you then it would be different if the case had a personal application. Well, I'll tell you now. This has been a test, and you haven't come through with it too well, Dorr. Rollo never was my mistress. We were married secretly, on my return."

There swelled a dull roaring in Dorr Manning's ears, like a vast, lofty wind or an earth-tremor moving upon them. He lifted his head, then reeled back from the impact of Max's great bulk, launched, as it seemed, at his throat. A shatter of light engulfed his brain. He heard confused voices, heard them insanely, for Carol Trent's sounded among them, in terror and warning. Some huge thing loomed upon him and struck him down into darkness.

CHAPTER XXI

Consciousness of virtue was prideful in Pat Scott's wifely breast as she rolled herself up, kitten-like, in the bed clothing and prepared for an early sleep. Was she not a model of the domestic proprieties in that she had declined several urgent invitations to go to the opening dance of the Country Club, because Cary was away? There was another reason, also, though— "You couldn't tell it on me with an x-ray," stated Pat with optimistic expressiveness. Rollo had gone to the party not so much from any desire on her own part as because both Pat and Cary had insisted, alleging that she was becoming mopy and that it was up to her to snap out of it.

At the moderate, but untimely, hour of eleven, Pat's bedside phone clamored in her ear. "Well, what the devil do *you* want?" queried the disturbed one, directing a malevolent glare upon the mechanism.

Rollo's voice sounded. "Pat, you little fool! What have you been doing?"

Pat said cautiously: "I dunno. What have I?" She added with awakening zest, "How, when, where, and who to?"

"Warren Graves. I'm having the most poisonous time with him!"

"One-o-one is the Fire Department," chuckled Pat. "Why crash into *my* beauty sleep with your passion-puzzles?"

"He's coming to make an evening call on you. That's why."

"What, *now?*" squeaked Pat. "Tell him to reverse the alarm clock; he's waked up backwards."

"He seems to think he's got a date with you."

"That boy ought to change his bootlegger," stated Pat earnestly. "You can tell him I said so."

"I've told him everything I can think of. Pat, *what* did you say to him today at the station when you were seeing Cary off?"

"I said it was a nice day. It was, you know," asserted Pat defensively.

"Well, it'll be a rough night," was the other's grim prediction, "if he has his way. What else did you offer?"

"I think I may have mentioned offhand that I was being left a widdy-lady once more."

"You would," was Rollo's caustic commentary. She knew Pat, the incorrigible, and her ineradicable instinct for playing the coquette in season and out, with or without conscious intention. As if reading her thought, the young wife said:

"I didn't *mean* anything by it."

"Which, of course, makes it a lot better!" was the ironic response.

"What's his line?"—anxiously.

"I should say," pronounced Rollo, with malicious deliberation, "to continue where your last home interview left off."

"Migod!" yammered Pat. "He wouldn't have the nerve. Boasting; that's what he is." But the memory

of past indiscretions smote her, and she turned to pleading.

"You've got to stop him, Rol."

"Yes; I've picked myself for that tasty little job. Now, glue your brain to this thought, my child. Warren has got one of those strategic, cunning shines on. He's been fishing around to find out when I was going home, until I got suspicious and rung in a hook and line of my own. Well, he bit—though I don't think he knows it yet. If he could be sure I was safe planted here, he'd ease out and keep his little date with you and make his getaway before I got back."

"I tell you there wasn't any date," whimpered Pat truthfully. "What'll I do, Rol? What'll you do?"

"Freeze to him like a wad of chewing gum to a set of false teeth. And if you think I'm going to love it any, you're wrong."

"I'll—I'll do anything for you if you'll only stop him," wailed Pat. "You know it would raise *hell* to have any mix-up now. Why did Cary go away? I didn't w-w-w-want him to."

"Cheer up. Lock the doors and don't unlock till you hear me whistle. I've got to beat it now and play my fish or he'll get away."

How pleased or disgruntled Mr. Warren Graves was over Miss Carol Trent's announcement that she was all hepped up for a moonlight whirl in his roadster must remain a matter of conjecture. At least he was game about it, and helped her in with care. But instead of taking the direct route to town he swung to the left, upon the back road.

"Where are we going?" asked his passenger. "Not that I care," she added.

She surmised a craftily alcoholic smile on his face as he answered, "How about dropping in on old Max for a little drink?"

"I don't think Max would be too pleased to see us at this hour."

"Where do you get that 'us'? I was figuring to park you there for an hour or so while I—well, I got a little business downtown."

Rollo was raging inwardly, but she controlled her voice to a silky flippancy as she retorted, "Supposing I'd rather be out here with you. Aren't you flattered?"

He brought the car to a slow standstill on the brink of a steep hill, switched off the lights and turned in his seat to look at his companion. She was bewilderingly pretty by the soft glow of the inside light. Though she had never before shown enough interest in him even to "play back"—he couldn't for his life understand why—there was seduction now in her slow, conscious smile, in the eyes that held steady on his.

"Downtown be damned," uttered Warren Graves with conviction. "This is good enough for me." He grabbed her to him and crushed his lips down upon her face.

For Rollo, it was just a little too much. All her resolution and self-control collapsed in the flood of sickened disgust that swept through her nerves. Not for Pat or anyone else could she endure that contact. She wrenched her face aside.

"Oh, for God's sake, Warren!" she gulped with such

an intensity of loathing that it penetrated through to his fuddled brain.

"Wh-what's it all about?" he mumbled in surprise. "Are you sore?"

"I'm sick—nauseated—at you," she quivered. "I can't *stand* you."

"Then what's all this guff about you're being so crazy about moonlighting with me?" he demanded, not without a show of reason.

"I know where you were going," she burst out on him. "You were going to try to see Pat, and you'd have made a row and a scandal, and it's all your rotten, poisonous conceit, anyway. Pat doesn't want you any more than I do."

Mr. Graves rumpled his hand through his hair. "Say, what's the matter with me anyway?" he inquired pathetically. "I don't seem to be in at the winning post at-*tall* these days."

"If you ask me," she retorted with chill venom, "I'd say you're a complete washout."

Mr. Graves summoned the appearance of dignity, and sat up at the wheel. "Thanking you one and all for your good opinion," he remarked, "we will now be on our chastened way."

He released the brake and the car glided silently forward upon the slope. "Speed," he asserted, "is what I need to soothe my wounded feelings. 'Tameless and swift and proud'; that's me."

"Look out!" warned the girl. "There's someone at the foot of the hill." She switched on the lights, and saw, direct in their path, two figures with lifted, blinded faces in the glare, the man who loved her, and the man

whom she loved. As she cried out, Max threw himself upon Dorr, thrust him aside so sharply that only the fender struck him, and himself went down beneath the wheel. Just too late, Warren whirled violently aside, and plunged the car into the stone coping of the bridge.

Rollo jumped, landing unhurt. She saw Warren dangling a limp arm, heard his agonized cry: "God! I've killed him," and Max's voice queerly low and calm saying, "I'm all right. Where's Flash?" She dropped on her knees beside Dorr Manning, who lay by the roadside bleeding from a gash across his forehead.

In a moment she looked up. "Can't you help me get him into the car?" she demanded of her companion.

He tried gamely but, one-handed, could do little.

"Is your arm broken?" she asked.

"I think so."

"That's a help," she commented grimly. "Will the car go?"

"No. Front wheel's gone."

She considered a moment. "You stay here and hold up any car that comes——"

"There won't be any this time of night on this back road."

"—and I'll go for Bobs," she concluded. She crossed over to Max Slater. "Better get up off that cold ground, Max," she counseled.

"I'm better off here," was the cheerful response. "If I move, it twinges. "Collar-bone, I expect. You go ahead."

Assured by his matter-of-fact tone she gathered her skirts around her and set out at a brisk pace, a strange

and brilliant figure darting through the night. The curve of Magruder Park Lane offered a cut-off. Halfway down it she saw lights flash on in the Lindsays' house, and without hesitation, ran in and hammered for admittance.

"I want to telephone," she panted into Careth Lindsay's face as the door opened.

"Is he dead?" said Careth Lindsay.

The girl stared at her, speechless with astonishment for a moment. "Who?" she asked stupefiedly.

"Dorr?"

"How did you know?"

"I saw him—again—with the blood streaming down his face," was the broken reply; "as I've seen him before—more than once."

Rollo was at the phone now, giving her sharp and concise directions to Osterhout. She set the receiver on, leaned against the wall, and stared at the other woman, whose form seemed to be growing dimmer and dimmer before her eyes. A voice, calm and wretched, called her senses back from the gulf of gray numbness into which they were sinking.

"Is he dead? You *must* tell me whether he is dead."

"No. I don't think so. I've got to go back."

"Take me with you. I've been waiting."

"How could you be waiting?" cried the girl wildly. "How could you know anything about it? It's only just happened."

"I knew," was the reply in that quiet voice of misery. "I saw it all—in one terrible flash, like fire in my brain."

They were outside now, hastening down the curved road. The moon had thrust out from a black embankment, and was careering madly across a sky filled with cloud-wreckage. As they reached the turn, the girl put a hand on the arm of her companion, and said a thing which, in a moment of less inner turmoil, would have been impossible to her; a question born of the passion and pain, the fear and uncertainty in her soul:

"Careth, if he's dead will you tell me something?"

"Perhaps. What is it?"

"Is he—yours?"

"I'll answer you now. I don't know."

They panted on. When they reached the scene of the crash, Dorr Manning was propped against the wall, still dazed.

"He's coming out, I think," said Warren Graves.

Every instinct of Rollo's heart urged her to him; but something stronger withheld her, told her that this was Careth Lindsay's moment; so much she owed to the other woman's agony and travail. As she stood wavering, a tiny, persistent, uncanny sound arrested her attention. It took her seconds to identify it as the catenation of drumming teeth.

"Max!" she cried, with a pang of conscience for her forgotten lover.

He gathered himself to make a valiant attempt at assuring her again that he was all right, but his words chittered and gasped. She dropped beside him, covering his breast with the warmth of her own, infusing his chilled and stiffened lips with her quickening breath. He stirred cautiously. "Careful, dear. My back."

"What's wrong with your back?"

"Just a bit of a wrench. I'm all right if I don't move."

"But you're cold. You're shaking all over." She dropped beside him, gathering him into her strong young arms, cherishing him to the warmth of her body. He sighed contentedly.

"That's better, I have to admit. What about Dorr? All right? I tried to shove him clear."

He felt the quiver go through her body, but she did not move except to lift her head. "He's come to," she answered. "Careth is with him."

Careth had gone straight to Dorr as if there were no other soul upon earth. "Dorr! Dorr!" she whispered passionately. "Did you come back for me?"

He murmured something which might or might not have been recognition.

"Tell me," she pleaded. "I've waited. How I've waited! And hoped—how I've hoped! That's all we women can do, lover; wait and hope. I told you I was going back to Tom; but I didn't want you to believe it. I haven't. Not yet. I've waited for you. And the ship sails next week. I'm packed and ready to go. But if you've come back for me, it's you I'll go with, not Tom. That's what I've meant all along—if you came back. Did you come back for me, Dorr?"

Dorr Manning's face came, wondering, out of dream-depths.

"Carol," he said softly. "Carol! I thought Carol was here. Who called——"

Careth Lindsay stood up, straight and white and

brave, in the moonlight. "Carol is here. Good-by, Dorr. I'm glad you didn't hear me."

She walked over to the girl. "You win, Rollo," she said clearly. "The girl will always win. She has so much more to give than we have—after we've given it."

A glare of light flashed between them. "Here's Bobs," said Careth. "It'll be all right now." She turned and walked into the shadows.

Osterhout went first to Max Slater, got some brandy into him, listened to his quick whisper, made a brief examination, and turned to Dorr Manning. Feeling Rollo's touch on his shoulder he nodded:

"All right, I think. No serious harm done. You might stand by a minute while I look Max over again."

Dorr's face was a red-flecked white, his eyes vague and yearning as he turned them on the girl.

"Was Max hit?" he asked thickly.

"Yes."

"Hurt?"

"Not badly, Bobs thinks."

"Why aren't you with him?" he said wonderingly.

"Bobs is making an examination."

"You ought to go to him," he muttered.

She caught his hand between hers. "Don't send me away—just for a minute."

"Am I going to die?" he asked.

"*No.* What makes you think anything like that?"

"I don't know. My head is funny. I thought—I thought you wouldn't be here with me unless— Did I call out when the car hit me?"

"Yes."

"Your name?"

"Yes."

His eyes closed. "I love you," he murmured. He tried to raise himself. "No; no! I didn't mean to say that."

Her voice was fierce and tender and tremulous in his ear. "Say it! I *want* you to say it."

"It's all so strange," he complained. "There was a moment—that day on the balcony—when you kissed me—I thought then that you, too——"

"Yes. *Yes!*" she murmured passionately, her breath on his cheek. "How could you help but know, after that?"

Then he said the incredible thing, clearly and slowly; she could not make the excuse to herself that she had failed to understand. "But it was after that that you married Max."

"Married Max?" she faltered.

"Yes. I remember it quite clearly now. He had just told me of it when the car struck us. I suppose there was some legal reason for keeping it secret."

She tried to answer, but her mind was one helpless whirling maze. Then he broke out on her, softly, bitterly:

"How could you do it, Carol! How could you go to him knowing—knowing that you and I loved each other?"

With that a terrible logic evolved itself from the tangle for her. Max had told Dorr that they had been married. Why? For only one conceivable reason; because Dorr, had he known her to be his friend's mistress,

would have turned against her, with the conventional revulsion of men for the unchaste woman. And what had Max expected to do? Marry her, doubtless, as he had indicated, and so make her respectable. Then, after his death, she could marry Dorr, with a double lie in her heart, the lie of their earlier relations, the lie of their marriage that was to have been no marriage. That is what they thought of her. That is what men thought of women; even men like Max and Dorr. She straightened up and turned away into the darkness. Bobs was before her, speaking to her quietly.

"What is it?" she asked dully.

"I want you to help me with Max."

Something in his tone made her ask quickly: "Is it worse than you thought?"

"A little less time, and a good deal less suffering," he answered gently.

"Oh, no!" she wailed.

The injured man heard her. "Hush, dearest. What's the difference, in my fix? It's really a bit of luck."

But she could not, at the moment's call, accept the view of reason. Only the thought of imminent death found room in her terrified thoughts. "I won't believe it," she cried fiercely.

"Is he going to die?" Warren Graves's pallid face was thrust close to the doctor's.

"He is. And unless I miss my guess, you're responsible," was Osterhout's uncompromising response.

"I'll go on the stand and swear it," choked Rollo.

Graves limped over and looked down on the peaceful

face of his mortally injured victim. "I'm sorry, old man," he said weakly. Then, to the physician: "Can I do anything further here?"

"No. Hold on. Where are you going—with that arm?"

"To the police station."

"Wait a minute." Osterhout was beginning to weaken. "If you were drunk when you hit him——"

"I was."

"—it may mean ten years."

"All right." Something submerged, some moribund, but still vital spark of manhood amidst the sour ashes of wreckage, some persisting tradition of courage, of fair play, of the creed of a gentleman, which is to the present generation what piety and the fear of God were to an earlier and sturdier, stirred to life in the drink-sodden soul of Warren Graves. "I guess I can take my medicine," he said.

"What's all this damned nonsense?" The voice from the ground was amazingly firm and imperative. "Stop him, someone, can't you!"

Osterhout laid hold of the uninjured shoulder.

"Now listen, all of you," dictated Max Slater. "This thing ends right here amongst friends. Flash, are you all right?"

"As soon as I stop being dizzy."

"Then there's no real harm done. Now this is how it happened, and I want you all to get it straight in case I don't have a chance to make a formal deposition. And if any one of you ever goes back on it, God help him—or her, either—for I'll come back and

haunt 'em. Now; are you set? Here goes," he added, having scanned the circle of faces over him.

"Dorr Manning and I came out for a walk and talk. We got to fooling like a couple of kids, over a new wrestling hold—we used to wrestle together in college; a pretty even match, though he gave me eighteen or twenty pounds—and we got excited, and were at it so hard that we never would have noticed if a building fell on us. The car was going slow enough, if we hadn't reeled right in front of it. Then, when I tried to break, Dorr thought it was a trick and bored in—and of course we got it. Nobody's fault at all. Is that quite clear?" he asked anxiously.

Nobody answered.

"Isn't it true, Flash?" he appealed to Dorr Manning.

"If you say so, old sport."

"Got it, Bobs?"

"Yes; you fool," said Osterhout in a shaken voice.

"Rollo?" Unconsciously his tone softened as he turned to the girl.

"No. No. *No!!*"

"*Rollo!* I want you to."

"Oh, yes," she sobbed.

"Here's the ambulance," announced Dorr.

"Remember, all of you," cautioned Max. "No breaks. You understand, Warren?"

But Warren Graves had slumped down on the running board of his car, his head bowed on his broken arm.

"Oh, Max, Max!" whispered Rollo, her cheek upon

the hurt man's. "He isn't worth it. What do you do it for?"

"Give him a chance," he whispered back. "He used to be a decent kid once. Maybe this'll make a man of him. A fellow that'll stand up to the gaff as he did is never quite gone."

CHAPTER XXII

Dead men tell no tales, solemnly oracularizes the proverb, with that effect of finality which the silliest saws gather about their venerable heads by the accretion of age. Most hoary old sayings, if properly diagnosed, would be found to be tottering with senile decay, anyhow. Tell no tales, the dead? They whisper forever in our ears; they inform our thoughts, our acts, our lives with their shadowy insistence. They stretch forth unseen hands from out of their incredible nothingness, and pull the wires of memory, of influence, of tradition, of loyalty, and we poor human merryjacks dance to a tune whose echoes ring back from the walls of eternity. It is the Will of the Dead.

Seven weeks had passed since Maxwell Slater had gone his painless way out into the teeming darkness, which we blind folk call death. But behind him, potent in the affairs of those whom he had loved—and perhaps continued to love—his spirit and purposes worked. Upon Rollo Trent, upon Dorr Manning, upon Warren Graves, in lesser degree upon the many who, knowing him but little in his semiseclusion, recognized now his courage, and the clear nobility of his life, and were, perhaps, a little different, a little better than they would have been without that recognition.

For the girl he had so passionately and unselfishly

loved, his final plan had worked to little purpose. Fearful of Dorr's Puritanism, he had pre-devised his lie about a secret marriage, and put it forth when convinced that Rollo's only chance of happiness lay in a course of deception. He had even bolstered it with documentary proofs, arranged beforehand; flimsy enough should anyone investigate; but who ever investigates a marriage certificate? In this, Dr. Osterhout was his doubting and unwilling accomplice, but Max had died before the plan could be completed, leaving Rollo in a cloud of uncertainty and sorrow. The one taint upon her memories of him was that he could so have misinterpreted her character as to have thought her weak enough, dishonest enough to accept and carry out the fiction of a marriage between them with Dorr as the object and victim of the deception.

But Dorr; what was now his attitude toward her? She had not seen him since the funeral. He had left town almost immediately, and had written her but once, such a letter as one might write to the widow of a friend, but with effortful wordings through which under-meanings seemed constantly striving to thrust themselves. They must see each other, he said, go over together matters which Max had intrusted to him for her—but not yet. Into that reluctance, that hurt shrinking from further hurt, the girl read diverse significances. To Dorr she was no longer the same, evidently; but in what sense of change? One of the Lindsays' dinner guests had defined the attitude of a certain type of man toward womankind: "To get you before some other fellow does." Was Dorr Manning of that

kind? Or was it a formalized loyalty to a dead friend that was holding him away from his widow?

About her own course she had never suffered any hesitancy. All the force of tradition and training, all her instinctive pride and courage impelled her to open dealing, no matter what the consequences to herself. Send for Dorr she would not. He must come to her of his own motion. But when time and opportunity were at hand she would fight for her happiness and his. Dorr loved her, and she loved him. That the revealing flash of passion had come late for her, had been too thwarted and uncertain for his full understanding, was a miscarriage which her resolute soul refused to accept as final. Each had gone astray from the straight path of love, Dorr swept away by an attraction which she could the better condone now that she could better comprehend its meaning; she by a reckless search for adventure, ending in the loving sacrifice of herself. Because of this quality of nobility in her surrender, she knew herself strong enough to build a new life of happiness above it. But not upon any perishable foundation of lies. Meantime she suffered, and accepted her suffering with stoic patience.

She sought alleviation for her loneliness in working on Max's papers, aware though she was that this would only inflame the semiscandal to which Max's death had given new force. She cared nothing about that. People might say and think of her what they chose. She felt a strange independence of spirit, a complete emancipation of soul. Except for one person, she would have been quite ready to avow the whole truth

had there been any good purpose to serve. But this avowal she owed only to Dorr Manning.

Max had given to her and to Osterhout duplicate keys to his laboratory which occupied a wing of the bungalow. "So that you can look in on my colloids now and then, and see they don't get lonely," he had said with a grin. "Do you remember the poor old colloids that I bored you with at your first Dorrisdale party, Rol?" She had spent many hours there since, sometimes with Bobs, sometimes alone, going over and arranging the scientific records; it was something that she could do, she felt, as a service to the dead man.

On a muggy and restless June evening she had gone out to walk and think, having successfully evaded several invitations, and had wandered down to Hartford Street. To her surprise she saw a light in Max's big living room. Stepping like an Indian, she made her way to the side window and peered in. Dorr Manning sat at the center table humped over a litter of papers. His whole being seemed devitalized, strangely reduced from that vivid, un-selfconscious masculinity that was the normal effluence of his personality. Though she stood perfectly still in the darkness, he raised his head sharply, staring at the window, and she saw that his face was strained and weary. It seemed as if he must see her, though she knew that this was impossible, since he was looking past the light. But her knees softened with the rush of pity, of tenderness, of longing that answered his unseeing look. She turned back into the night, her first illogical, feminine instinct being to run

from the claim and clamor of her heart. At the edge of the lawn she pulled up short.

"Rollo Trent," she addressed herself sternly, "you're going back. Straight back into the lion's den. All these footless months you've been playing with unreal things and getting burnt at it. You've been fooling around with men who've wanted you and whom you haven't wanted; and here's the man you do want, and have always wanted, if you'd had the sense to know it. Now you're going to have it out with him."

Girlwise, she wished at the door that she might have just one reorganizing glimpse at a mirror. She need have had no concern. With her heightened color, the brilliant daring of her eyes, her turbulent hair, and the valiant poise of her young body as Dorr opened to her imperious knock, she was such an apparition of loveliness, an embodiment of desirability that he could only stand, for the moment, gaping at her.

"You!" he finally found breath to say.

"Yes. Didn't you feel that I was here, when you looked up?"

"I believe I did. But I didn't dare credit it. Are you coming in?"

"That doesn't sound too welcoming."

"I was wondering," said he doubtfully. "At this time of night——"

"Conventionalities! And in this place. I've been here before, later than this." She smiled defiantly. "As you've heard on good authority."

So much stilled pain was in the look he gave her that, for the moment, she would not trust herself to speak

again. She walked past him into the long room. Everything stood unchanged from Max's occupancy, except the paper-littered table. Dorr drew around the heavy old sofa, in order that, seated, she might catch the light draught. Instinctively she shrank from her memories; then, with an angry flush at her own cowardice, dropped into a pillowed corner of it. She would shirk nothing which, in any way, represented her bond with Max Slater. To do so would be both disloyalty to him and the confession of a dishonor which she did not, could not feel.

"Go on with your work," she said to Dorr.

"It's a horrible mess." He lifted his head and forced a smile. The girl was startled at her first plain sight of his face.

"You look *ghastly*. Been ill?"

"No; not ill."

"What then?"

"Well—worried."

"Wanta tell a fella and get it off the old chest?" she insinuated lightly.

He pointed to the papers. "There are the troubles. And here," he picked up a letter which he handed to her, "is something else again."

It was from Warren Graves, a brief, somewhat formal report on himself which somehow contrived to be the more convincing because of its rigid style: he had not taken a drink since the accident, he was going back into the diplomatic service, and—here was the humanizing touch—if there were some small thing personal to Max that he could have, a scarf pin or match safe

or pen that Max had used, he would appreciate it. "He's Max's last job and a good one," said Dorr. "I'd have sent him to jail, but Max knew better. 'The evil that men do lives after them,' " he quoted scornfully. "A rotten doctrine. Max's was the sound one."

The girl's eyes were soft with tears. "I'd like to keep this letter. And I'd like to write Warren. May I, do you think?"

"Of course. Give the poor kid a boost. He's had a tough time."

"But why did he write you for the keepsake?"

"I'm Max's heir—officially."

"He's left you his property? Dorr! How splendid!"

"Officially, I said. It's really yours. All of it."

"Mine?" she queried dully. "He left it to me? What for?"

"Because he wants you to have it, I suppose," said Dorr, patiently explaining the obvious.

"But I don't want it. I don't need it. And you do."

"What's that got to do with it? Max's definite instructions were for me to turn it over to you, though I can't make out why. As his wife, you should inherit direct. He tried to make me understand something about some legal complication, but there wasn't time."

"I never was his wife," said Carol Trent simply.

He shook his head. "Yes; he said that you might try to keep the secret, but what's the use, with me, Carol? He's told me where to find the papers, when it comes time to produce the proofs."

"If there are any papers they're forged."

He stared, then smiled tolerantly. "But that's melodrama. And Max was the least melodramatic of men. Come on, Carol: I should think you could trust me, if he could."

"Max was doing his best to protect me, because he loved me," said the girl. "I don't think a woman is loved twice in a lifetime as he loved me. And," she added with quiet, remorseful bitterness, "it wasn't enough."

"Not enough for you to marry him, you mean?" His eyes upon hers were compulsive, full of demand, of incomprehension, of suffering.

"Yes; there was a time when I would have married him. I'd agreed to."

"After he'd come back?" he broke out with subdued violence. "After that day on the balcony? Then it was all a lie, that kiss?"

He could hardly hear her answer: "It was truer than any word could be."

"Yet you could have gone to him, after you had come to know that you loved me?" he demanded incredulously.

Ah, this was hard, hard! She could not have conceived that it would make so agonizing a call upon her resources of courage. Well, it had to be done. She rose and came and stood over him. "Max had been my lover before that."

She had the sense that he had receded into a great and dim distance from which his answer was barely audible: "The night of the Dangerfield party?"

"Yes."

"Then Max was a damned, corrupt rotter," he cried.

She flamed into furious loyalty to her dead. "He was not. How dare you say that to me! He was everything that was fine and straight. He was so terribly in love with me, and I—I fooled him, Dorr." Quite simply she told him of her stratagem.

"How you must have loved him," said he wonderingly, sorrowfully.

"It wasn't love; not as love might be—" She left that unfinished, but went on in a half whisper: "I didn't know even what love meant, then. Nor—nor afterward."

"Afterward? After he came back? You mean——"

"No. Never. Not after that day on the balcony. I couldn't have. And he wouldn't have let me. He knew then that I loved you, though I tried so to keep it from him. Poor Max! I gave him all I could. And that wasn't enough."

"But you would have married him after that," he cried painfully. "That is what I can't bear to think of——"

"Would I have?" she speculated mournfully. "I—don't know. It seemed so cruel to take from him the little that he had. And then, when he knew how I felt toward you, he wanted to go through the form of a marriage with me, for appearance's sake, and because —because he thought that if you knew I had been his mistress— And then came the accident."

"It would have been worse," he asserted somberly, "if you had gone to him, married or unmarried, after the realization of what we were to each other."

"As you did to Careth," she accused.

He said nothing, but the lines in his face seemed to have sunk in deeper.

"I know you were her lover," said the girl. "Oh, no need to defend her by pretending and denying," she cried, forestalling his eager and wretched attempt to break in. "She told me so herself that night of the accident when we were all a little crazy in the head. You went from me to her. *How* could you do it, Dorr?"

"Because I was a beast—and a hurt beast. How can I make you understand? It was—I don't know how to put it—the blind seeking for an anodyne against pain."

He dropped his head forward until it rested on the back of her hand. At the touch, the weight of his forehead, there sprang to life in her flesh an obscure pulse, a new little heart, beating fiercely, insistently. With a gasp she snatched away her hand. He jerked his head back and stared up at her miserably.

"Forgive me," he said.

"I won't!" she cried savagely. "I never will. Never! Never!!" And without knowing how or by whose initiative she was upon his breast, breathless and helpless in the whirling fire of his long kiss. "I love you," she moaned, and the words seemed to tear their way through her being to birth in an agony and an ecstasy of the flesh. Violently she thrust herself free of him, her eyes flaring into his. "When I think that you have felt for another woman what you make me feel, it seems a desecration."

"But you, yourself," he protested; "you must have——"

"No," she broke in passionately. "No matter what happened—it was nothing, less than nothing; so little that it hardly seems real. While with you, just the touch of your hand on mine— Oh, I could *hate* you for it!"

She stood away from him, no longer the acquiescent lover of that momentary all-confessing embrace, but in a surge of unreasoning resentment. "Why should women be that way?" she challenged; "it isn't fair."

She set her hands to her forehead, then to her hair, and with the familiar gesture of readjustment, her mood changed, cooled. "Let's be sane, for a change," she suggested lightly. "Did you say you had some business matters to go over with me?"

"This money of Max's. How can we best manage that?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "We're back in a world where things like money matter, again. But I can't seem to make it matter much to me. You keep it; that's the easiest way."

"But I can't keep it. It isn't mine. It's yours."

"Suppose I just refuse to take it?"

"A nice hole that would put me in!" he retorted wrathfully.

A subtle, oppositious little devil took possession of her, lighting her face to mischief.

"It seems to me you put yourself in the hole when you went into the deal without consulting me."

"Max put it up to me to work it out with you after-

ward. I couldn't go back on what he wanted of me, could I? You and I were to figure out some method of getting it into your hands, without making it a matter of record."

She considered. A mocking, baffling twinkle came into her eyes. "There's only one way I can think of."

"Well, one's enough," he greeted this announcement hopefully.

"Hasn't it occurred to you?"

"No. If it were a small sum I could manage it as cash; but with the securities and the house——"

"You might marry the girl, you know, and make a rich as well as an honest woman out of her."

He winced. "I won't have you talk of yourself that way."

"But it's the way people would talk if they knew. Plenty of 'em think that way now of me. Maybe you do yourself."

"I don't know what I think," he muttered. "I only know that I love you, and that I've never loved anyone else."

"Is it true?" she asked softly. "I want to believe that, Dorr. But I'm so afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of the thought of Max coming between us; of its poisoning your love."

"Do you expect me not to feel that?" he asked, chokingly.

"Does it hurt so much?" Her voice was pitying, as if she were speaking to a child.

"It hurts like hell," he said simply.

"That's my punishment, then; to be hurt because you're hurt. My punishment for having transgressed the moral law." Her head went up sharply in pride and denial. "I won't admit that it was a moral law, for Max and me," she declared. "It was just one of the rules of the game, and we broke it, because we thought we were outside of all rules. Dorr, tell me the truth: am I an immoral woman, because of what we did?"

He looked up at her, standing there in her honesty, her unregretting acceptance of a status which would have overborne a weaker woman, and the loyalty and honor in him rose to meet hers. "No," he answered. "God knows, you're not."

"And that's a big thing for the Puritan to admit." She put her two hands on his shoulders. "Oh, my dear: I'm terribly, bitterly sorry for what I've done, because it hurts you. But I can't be sorry, for myself. And I can't be ashamed. If I had my life to live over again, in the same circumstances, I'd do the same again. It's your fault," she accused fiercely. "Why didn't you tell me sooner that you loved me? then it never could have happened."

"I was trying to make myself believe that it wasn't so; that I was over it."

"It must have been so always for both of us. What fools we've been, Dorr, we two. And because we've been fools, there are two shadows between us, Max and Careth. And Careth is a living shadow. Dorr, I want the truth from you now. If you had only one

more day to live, whom would you go to, Careth or me?"

"For a day, an hour or a lifetime, you!"

She pondered; her breath quickened like that of an athlete nerving himself to a test of daring and risk. "If Max had lived. Do you love me enough to have wanted to marry me then?"

His face changed, darkened, flushed heavily. "It wouldn't make any difference; I'd marry you today and thank God for the right to."

"It wouldn't make any difference?" she repeated with solemn questioning. "Think, Dorr!"

"I can't fool myself," he admitted bitterly. "It would make a difference every day of our life together, the knowledge that you had belonged to another man on earth."

At that she flashed out upon him, with girlish indignation. "I never heard of anything so rotten and unfair and one-sided in my life, after what you've done. It ought to make me hate you, but—but I think I'd *want* you to feel that way about me. Oh, Dorr, dear, we're both groping so, and after all the groping there's nothing for either of us to find but each other. The trouble with us is that you've tried too hard to be good, and I've tried too hard not to be, and both of us have messed it up. We ought to make a pretty good average of it. I suppose," she added reflectively, "a woman has got to have something to forgive in the man she loves—or what's the sense of being a woman! And I'd rather have it before marriage than after. *I'm* not cut out for the Sailors' Wives' rôle. . . .

Dorr, are you sure you're not making a mistake in wanting to marry me?"

"It's the only thing in the world that I am sure of."

"With all the memories that we have to live down?" she pursued wistfully, but ruthlessly. "Wouldn't it be easier and better to say good-by here tonight? Or"—she held him in her still, courageous regard, her color mounting but her eyes unflinching—"after tonight, here, tomorrow?"

He smiled. "I think you'd better be going home, darling. . . . That was a test, wasn't it?"

"Yes. You know too much, Dorr."

"And if I'd answered differently?"

"I'd have stayed. But I'd never have come back. Because you'd have made me too cheap in my own eyes. Can you understand that?"

He answered: "Do I have to understand? Can't I adore you without understanding you?"

"Oh, I hope so!" she flashed. "It would be too boring to have a husband who understood everything about one. But," she added sobering instantly, "I've got to make you understand me in one way. Max did because he loved me so. And Max told me that I was a one-man woman. I'm afraid it's true, dear. If I hadn't found you, I'd never have found anyone who could fulfill love for me. I don't know how I know that, but I do know it. Oh, I suppose I'd have gone ahead and married somebody, because most girls do, and have had children and all the rest of it, without ever knowing. But I'd always have had dreams of something sweet and wild and wonderful lost out of my

life. It's rather devastating, dearest, to be a one-man woman," she murmured, back in his arms now, "when the man arrives. It makes your spine feel all soft and buttery. You needn't laugh at me, pig, because I'm going to talk just as imbecilically as I feel. And anyway, it's time you took me home. Where's my hat?"

"Wait a minute. I think I've got a message for us."

"How could there be a message for us when nobody knew we'd be here together?"

"I'm not so sure of that nobody-knew business. Look at this." He held up an envelope inscribed in Maxwell Slater's strong writing: "To be opened when Dorr and Rollo decide."

"We've decided," she asserted promptly. "Open it. No; let me."

She tore the length across and took out a slim sheet of paper, bearing half a dozen lines.

"Remember, you two dear people, that there's a touch of the pagan in every marriage, however Christian in form, for otherwise how would the well-known human race keep going? Max."

The girl laughed, softly, triumphantly. "Do you think he need have reminded us, Dorr?" she queried.

She kissed his lips, then detached his arm from her waist and drifted to the open window. "Cover your ears, lover," she directed. "I've got a prayer to make. A very private prayer, all of my own."

Out into the darkness of the sweet, rainy night she

leaned her young body, and gave words to the faith, the honor, the loyalty in her heart.

"Oh, Max. I'm not sorry. I'll never be sorry. Can you hear me, Max?"

Out of the night came a sigh of wind, bending a blossom on the vine to touch her cheek, a flower of the burgeoning summer, sweet and perishable, like loveliness, like happiness, like love, like all things to which men and women give imperishable faith and hope.

THE END